# Habba Khatoon

## The Nightingale of Kashmir

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*Subhash, my younger son*
*who is no more.*

# *Preface*

In Kashmir, men roving upon the rivers, ladies at their looms and farmers in the fields sing the lilting songs of Habba Khatoon, the beloved queen-consort of Yusuf Shah Chak, who ruled over Kashmir during the years 1578 A.D. to 1579 A.D. and 1580 A.D. to 1586 A.D. Habba, whose original name was Zoon (Moon), was a peasant girl who had many-splendoured personality, a poetess, an eminent musician and a melodious singer. She had a distinctive beauty of body and soul that captivated Yusuf Shah and influenced the minds of her people. Her life, amazingly enough, is shrouded in mystery. Who exactly was this lady who has left a trail of glory and till this day is known as the Nightingale of Kashmir?

Kashmiri poetry, unfortunately, existed largely in oral tradition upto 1930 A.D. Therefore, the lives of poets are mostly wrapped in mystery. Even the lives of queens receive scant or no attention from the political historians and so these queens remain as illusive phantoms. But go about in Kashmir, towns and villages, you will know the story of Habba Khatoon from the lips of men and women. In Chandhara, the village where she is supposed to have been born, old men and women give the details of her life. Thus the account of her life is based on the firm bedrock of tradition and legend, illuminated by a few historical flashes of men like Birbal Kachru, Hassan Kohiyami, Moh'd Din Fauq, R. K. Parimu and G. M. D. Sufi, etc. Her own verses also throw a flood of light on her life. Nevertheless,

history itself depends on bards, heresay and story-tellers. Plutarch and Kalhana, the two great ancient historians, too made use of these sources.

From Habba Khatoon's verses we know that she was born in Chandhara, a village situated at a distance of about ten miles from Srinagar. But when and where she died, nothing definite is known. There is a theory that Akbar, the Mughal Emperor, annexed Kashmir and kept Yusuf Shah in captivity. Habba left the palace, became a mendicant and renounced the world. She made a small hermitage at Panda Chok, a small village, on the bank of the river Jhelum. Then after twenty years she died in dejection and was buried near her cottage, where her grave is supposed to have been identified.

As to the question most often put to an author, a question which leaves most of us bewildered, why did you write this book? Here is my answer. In the summer of 1979 A.D. I broadcast a 'talk' on Habba Khatoon from the Radio Kashmir, Jammu, which was later published in August of the same year in the 'Akashwani,' New Delhi. My 'talk' fascinated many educated ladies of Jammu. In fact one poetess of Jammu was strongly affected by the pathetic story of her life and she composed a poem on her in Hindi. This prompted me to study the poems of Habba Khatoon and read the history of the Sultanate period of Kashmir in depth and also visit Chandhara and meet a large number of people there as well as in Srinagar and know about her life. All this knowledge stirred my imagination and raised a vision in my mind which clamoured to be brought to life. Thus the idea of writing this book was born in me.

I have written this book as a historical novel, rather a biographical novel. I may explain the reason for not writing the biography itself. As is obvious history is a factual record of past events, all very dull and precise. History looks from the outside and it makes no attempt to probe inside the person. I wanted to resurrect the lady and the king, the turbulent times

and the people, the way they spoke, they ate, they prayed, they sang, their customs, their tears and laughter. Undoubtedly, Habba Khatoon's verses as well as the stories about her current among the people of Kashmir provided me with strong skeleton of Habba Khatoon which I have filled with flesh and blood by my imagination and visualising her time after reading the history of the Sultanate period of Kashmir. Thus I have tried to give her a corporal body, full of life and blood.

The pattern of this epic story of Habba Khatoon and Yusuf Shah Chak is, of course, plain; it has a beginning, a middle and an end and so for the matter of that is well constructed. The book arrives at a tremendous deeply moving climax that one finds himself in tears. The novel is dominated by two themes. First is Yusuf Shah and Habba Khatoon's ethereal love which is enacted in the beauty spots of Kashmir — Gurez, Gulmarg and the gardens. Almost all of these places, surrounded by a halo of romance, I have personally visited and have meticulously described them in the book. During their wandering Habba and Yusuf seems to have seen "earth and every common sight, apparelled in celestial light." Moreover, this theme of love is based on the theory that each man and woman has his or her true and unique counter-part — soul-mate — either in this life or some other. Habba Khatoon was such a 'soul-mate' of Yusuf Shah. Singing her love-lyrics, she moved like Cindrella through the pageantry of the "Yusufean" scene. Yusuf Shah is a historical character and I have brought him vividly into view by unlocking his mind and conscience.

Second, Habba Khatoon was a passionate idealist girl, who burnt her life to some cause, precisely Kashmiri poetry and music. She possessed a sweet nightingale-like voice and was a renowned singer. In this story the song of life is easily perceptible. We find in her verses "the profound sadness of invisible tears." Therefore, I have befittingly studded this work with some gems of her poetry.

Nevertheless, I have tried to stick to history as far as I could gather up the knowledge about her life and her times. My aim has essentially been to bring to light "the live force", through Habba Khatoon's life, of Kashmir and hold a mirror to it as far back as 16th century. This has been my urge.

S.N. Wakhlu

# *Acknowledgement*

I owe my debt of gratitude to Dr. Karan Singh Ji, the former Maharaja of Jammu & Kashmir and the former Union Minister, for the encouragement and the inspiration that I drew from his books and his many-splendoured personality.

I am thankful to Prof. Ravinder Kumar, Director, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, who initially explained to me in detail the way I should write this book.

I also express my thanks to Dr. K. L. Choudhary, Prof. and Head, Department of Medicine, Government Medical College, Srinagar, who meticulously read the book in manuscript form and gave me many suggestions. Similarly, my son, Dr. Vijay Wakhlu, also read the manuscript and suggested me to delete some episodes. He also deserves my thanks.

I am truly grateful to the multitude of people, professors, intellectuals and common men of Srinagar, as also some farmers and some old men and women of Chandhara, who imparted me some knowledge about the life of Habba Khatoon.

**S.N. Wakhlu**

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## Chronology of The Chak Dynasty

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Ghazi Shah | 1561 A.D. |
| 2. Hussan Shah | 1563 A.D. |
| 3. Ali Shah | 1570 A.D. |
| 4. Yusuf Shah (I) | 1578-79 A.D. |
| 5. Lohar Shah | 1579 A.D. |
| 6. Yusuf Shah (II) | 1580 A.D. |
| 7. Ya'qub Shah (I) | 1586 A.D. |
| 8. Husain Shah | 1586 A.D. |
| 9. Ya'qub Shah (II) | 1586-88 A.D. |

PART 1

# THE PARENTAGE

One can run away from a serpent,
One can run away a league from a lion,
One can keep oneself off the creditor for a year,
But one cannot escape Fate for a twinkling of an eye.

—*Nund Rishi*

# 1

# *The Parents*

The picturesque Kashmir evokes the simile of an emerald set in pearls, as it is a green valley surrounded by snow-capped green mountains. It is a veritable garden and its unsurpassed beauty, its air laden with the scent of flowers that blows through its mountains and forests and its bubbling brooks and gurgling springs cast a magical spell on everyone exposed to its breathtaking loveliness.

Away and aloof and not placed on the direct route to the Indian sub-continent, Kashmir escaped the fury and storms of the invading forces and so developed a unique and distinct character and culture of its own. But, at the same time, it was not cut off from the mainstream of ideas, ideologies and fresh influences. Thus it acquired and absorbed the multiple cultural elements brought in the wake of the wave after wave of invaders over the sub-continent.

In Kashmir, during the rule of the Chaks*, by and large, the people were gentle and highly intelligent and quick to learn, but tended to be apathetic and lacking initiative. Peasantry was exploited by the rich lords who lived in arrogant feudal style. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, known as Bad Shah, great king,

* The Chak dynasty ruled Kashmir from 1561 to 1588 A.D.

was long since dead but he was alive in the hearts and memories of the people. He had introduced many arts and crafts and invited craftsmen and artisans from distant countries like Persia, Turkestan and Kabul, as well as from other parts of India and they had settled down in Kashmir. It was in his reign that the arts of paper-making, *papier mache*, shawl embroidering, silk manufacturing, carpet weaving and *gabba* and *namada* making were introduced in Kashmir and ever since had been patronised by the Muslim Sultans of Kashmir. Thus Kashmir was prosperous and the people were happy.

The mosques were extremely grand and so were the Hindu temples, nor were the educational institutions and hospitals less worthy of admiration. In point of splendour and beauty of appearance, Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, was magnificent and unmatched. It was situated on both sides of the river Jhelum and was not only the seat of the government but also a centre of trade and industry. It was filled with merchants and artisans of every description. The inhabitants of Srinagar were, in general, liberal and kind-hearted men, sophisticated in manners and noble in appearance. They loved poetry, song and music and dancing. The majority of the people were Muslim and the Hindu Brahmans were in a minority but both the communities followed a host of indigenous saints and *darveshes* and *Rishis*, like Sidh Bau, Lal Ded and Nund Rishi, etc. The mystic verse and the sayings of these persons were remembered by every person of the valley. Their teachings had enriched the minds of the people. The import of Islamic thought and Sufi ideas on Hindu thought led to a devotional religious movement of "Rishis" based on direct love of God which found expression in the lives of many of the darveshes and the Hindu saints. A harmonious and pleasant social relations existed among the people of Kashmir. The common social customs, old traditions and the teachings of these Muslim darveshes and the Hindu saints contributed in cementing the love and sympathy among the Hindu and the Muslim communities. Actually, the majority of Muslims in the valley

were the converts from Hindus, and, therefore, they all had come out of the same womb and the same blood ran through their veins. They had evolved a common culture, a common way of living, a common and unique dress of their own and even common eating habits. The Brahmans used to relish the eating of fish and meat.

The houses in Srinagar were generally wooden and many storeys high and attached to these houses there were many gardens, at once spacious and beautiful, abounding in many kinds of fruits. In the poor quarters of the city the houses were crazily built and overhanging storeys leaned against the streets almost touching at the top and shutting light and air from the festering piles of refuse that lay against each wall.

In this city, on the right bank of the Jhelum, lived the clan of Rathars in a number of houses huddled together. The locality was called Rathar Mohalla. One of them was Abdulla Rathar, popularly called Abdi Rathar, who had been a traveller from the age he was a youngman of eighteen when he set out from his native city of Srinagar in company and service of a rich merchant, whose extensive connection induced him to visit various parts of Dardistan and Ladakh and even Tibet. With him Abdi Rathar arrived at the small glen of Gurez to the north of Kashmir. His master, Khawaja Amin Sahib, as he was known, was highly respected there and even in great credit with the chieftain of that place so that he had obtained various privileges from him, in consideration of the able and beneficial manner in which he promoted the commerce of Gurez. In a matter of months, Abdi Rathar acquired a good knowledge of the language, manner and peculiar practices of the people of Gurez. They were good people. He met with more instances of true charity and kindness from those who were termed as uncivilized people than those who were called civilized and cultured. "They are such warm-hearted people here," thought Abdi Rathar.

Abdi Rathar was certainly a very handsome man, affable and liberal and soon attracted the notice of the Chieftain and other men of Gurez who were blessed with large families of daughters and good incomes. The Chieftain's daughter was a superb creature who looked at Abdi with tender eyes whenever he came to the Chieftain's home to relish his special green tea. The Chieftain considered Abdi the luckiest man alive and not an ordinary human being. He had, as he said, every thing—good looks, money, talent for singing and playing on *sarangi*.

One morning, very early, Abdi Rathar, got up after a sleepless night and went out into the chill dewy dawn. The small gardens were grey and misty but the light in the front one was golden. It spread and deepened till the grass and the trees took on their green again and in the hedges the wild flowers that had been white through moonlight and in twilight green pink again as daylight kissed them.

Then the round sun sprang up, above the shoulder of the mountain and all the world shone like a jewel, newly cut.

Abdi Rathar saw the Chieftain's daughter. She was leaning her elbows on a gate and looking out on the mountains. She had a dark red *choga* and a white shawl on because the dews were heavy and it was quite cold in the young morning hours. When he saw her he was enchanted.

He spoke to her.

"What are you doing in such a biting cold?" and she replied timidly: "I come here because it is so beautiful."

"You come early," he said stupidly enough.

"Yes, you see, it is really the only time I call my own, because I have to do a lot of work later."

She looked more like a child, with her little white face and curly black tresses. She was so frank and friendly, so innocent and young!

They talked long till the sun had risen high. He told her his name, though she already knew it and she said shyly that she had heard of him.

"What have you heard?" he asked eagerly.

She laughed a little and said, "O nothing really; only that you are clever and good."

When they parted at last—it was at the stile that led across the compound to the house where she lived; he went to his residence, knowing that his soul was new-born. Folks say that there was no such thing as first love, save in the vain dreams of poets, but his beloved and he knew well whether or not God had added that perfect gift to all the gifts of His good earth.

They met again, many times, at first in the dewy mornings and afterwards, when the sweet, full security of mutual love matured, in the soft, ghostly progress of the waning summer evenings.

Khawaja Sahib was away, travelling. He had left Abdi confidently to the care of the Chieftain, his friend. Abdi Rathar met his beloved every night through the sweet summer and the chill windy autumn and in these months she had grown into his very heart and then one day he came back to his residence with her soft kiss on his lips, to find Khawaja Sahib had returned from his travels.

One day, soon after, the Chieftain invited the Khawaja to a dinner. In a general way the former enquired about Abdi Rathar. Khawaja Sahib was eloquent and persuasive and praised Abdi Rathar, elaborated on his qualities of mind, his sensitiveness and generosity of his heart. The Chieftain spoke little, gave his side long glances and got him served a substantial meal. Then he broached the delicate subject of his daughter's marriage to Abdi Rathar. Moreover, he felt that his trade would thrive by that alliance. The Chieftain said that Abdi must live in Gurez, for if his daughter had left, his house

would look forlorn. The sound of her lovely voice, her little things were part of the atmosphere, the soul of the house. Of course, he had sons but they must move to other houses. All departures are deathlike, he could not bear her separation. In a few years the princely house would be just a deserted house, a melancholy shelter for two ageing and lonely people. He didn't want to send her away to Srinagar. But Khawaja Sahib was opposed to Abdi's living permanently in Gurez.

Whenever Abdi Rathar spent an evening with the Chieftain's family, they would do their best to please him and their best would be very good. The daughter's culture left much to be desired, her manners were a little crude, but in matters of love her knowledge was instinctively surprising. She was born to love as a bird to fly. Abdi Rathar discovered that this good-natured sensuous girl would make him an excellent wife.

During the winter the Khawaja and Rathar stayed in Gurez but then the winter passed, the snow thawed on the roofs and the narrow streets became quagmires of mud. And then it was May, and all of a sudden the air was alive with the twitter of birds. In the small kitchen-gardens apricot trees waited for the spring, each twig green-nailed with buds. Children in red cloaks yelled and ran and stumbled on the grass. Then the Khawaja thought of going to the other places in the frontier area and later hasten back to Srinagar.

But Abdi would not hear of going. He was head over heals in love with the Chieftain's daughter. He would marry and stay with her people. The Khawaja gazed at Abdi but his handsome face, a moment ago so mobile, had set into a mask of unapproachable remoteness. Now and then the eyes wandered on some inner vision. Slowly the Khawaja ran his bulging eyes over his subordinate and let out a derisive snort. He pleaded with him to profit from his own unhappy experience about women and renounce the Chieftain's daughter. The women, he said, were the infernal creatures. They usually were most attractive. With passion he denounced his wife

who was the cause of his wanderings. "Lying, wanton, selfish, and expensive—that is what she was," said the Khawaja. He quoted some writer: "A woman has the morals of an alley cat, the ethics of a grave robber, she is a wallet-vampire, a heartless wench". But he stopped abruptly as memories flashed to his mind.

"She may be a slut, a creature of the very Satan, but I can't live without the Chieftain's daughter. I must stay here," Abdi Rathar said with determination.

The Khawaja went on in his mellifluous tone to talk about himself. He did so with relish and studied modesty. He had been a poor shopkeeper at a certain village in Kashmir and it was difficult for him to make both ends meet and so he got away from there. He had an iron will and within a month had managed to obtain an employment with a shawl-merchant who traded in the frontier regions. With his superhuman industry the Khawaja became rich.

His business acumen and integrity had rapidly placed him in the forefront of his profession. His main building alone in Srinagar consisted of thirty rooms, deodar staircase, a hall capable of accommodating about fifty dinner-guests, an ornate music room and a large room for holding *Hafiz-Nagma.* The garden consisted of five acres of lawn and flower beds and fruit trees. He possessed a large number of servants and maids. It was recognized as the most opulent residence in Srinagar.

Then came the turn of the wheel. Unfortunately, his patron's daughter fell in love with him. Loyalty was the cornerstone of service and friendship and he was full of loyalty. He went to the merchant and gave his consent. But soon after marriage he found his wife full of lies, deceit and extravagance. She was hot-headed and arrogant and treated him as a slave. Thus disgusted, he spent much of his time outside his house. She nearly ruined him by spending the money

lavishly. "But praise be to the Holy Prophet, she is now dead and I am relieved," said the Khawaja.

"It must be an accident, a freak of luck; all women are not like that," said Abdi.

"No, believe me Abdi, women are fundamentally evil. Their function in the world is to break men's hearts, empty their wallets and wreck their lives. They can't help it, it is their nature."

"The Chieftain's daughter has thrown herself on me and we are madly in love with each other. She is the loveliest creature. Khawaja Sahib, I again say that all women are not like your wife."

All the Khawaja's advice fell flat on him. His voice now became feeble but sweet and he blessed Abdi.

"I love you Abdi. I wanted to keep you with me always. Can I do anything for you?"

"Nothing, sir, thank you."

"No, no, I consider that when a man has done his duty as well as you have done yours, he has a sort of claim upon his employer for any little assistance he can render him. Anyway, this shawl is for your wife and some money for your wedding. We have been good friends, Abdi. Have we not?"

"Yes, sir."

Then the Khawaja took leave of Abdi with a heavy heart. Abdi got up and accompanied him upto the gate. Khawaja embraced him and said, "Abdi, you are a warm-hearted man. You will have a prosperous life. Allah bless you!"

# 2

## *Love in the Clouds*

Gurez was a land of dreams and the Chieftain of the land was a soft and dreamy man. He called Abdi Rathar in the afternoon for a *tete-e-tete* over a cup of tea. Abdi felt nervous and paced the street for half an hour.

He knocked at the door which was promptly opened by a drowsy-looking old woman. The room appeared a little dim. Then he gave a friendly glance at the clean and well decorated room and sat on a white carpet with big flowers embroidered on it against a bolster at his back. He had just started thinking about the mysterious ways of God when another door opened from the side wall and the Chieftain's wife glided in wearing a beautiful black cloak, a smile on her fair aristocratic face. Obviously, she was a very beautiful woman. Her manner was courteous and ladylike in the extreme, with a touch of watchful reserve.

He got up and bowed to her.

"May the Holy Prophet protect you"! she said. "Indeed, it is very kind of you to call on us, Rathar Sahib. But the noble Sultan Sahib is not here; he has been called away unexpectedly; but he will soon come back."

The conversation opened on the description of Srinagar and the people of Kashmir, their way of living and the status of women, etc. Then there was the lively interlude on the question of refreshment. "Would Rathar Sahib like to drink tea or a bowl of their specially brewed liquor," enquired the Sultana. Abdi Rathar preferred tea. "One of my regrets is that my daughter could not visit Srinagar, although Sultan Sahib often went there but I have tried to make a lady out of her," said the Sultana rather pensively.

Abdi Rathar, in order to continue the conversation, asked her what, in her opinion, were a lady's most important qualities. "A lady should know how to adorn herself and look beautiful and try to bring pleasure to her husband, provide a well-managed home for her husband, create around him an atmosphere of orderliness and serene contentment. She should never be brooding and look sad but most of the time try to look lively and cheerful and satisfy her husband's ego. According to our principles a man is her master and lord who can command her to do anything, "replied the lady.

"But in Kashmir we treat a woman as our equal, rather it is man who tries to keep his woman in good humour," said Abdi Rathar. His words opened a window in her heart. The talk continued for some time. They had at the very first meeting got quite intimate.

Then her daughter entered and the Sultana recalled an urgent appointment and she said that she must reluctantly get up to go. The girl was nibbling one of the pieces of sweet bread which she had drawn out of her pocket and was all the time looking at Abdi and smiling, possibly she did not know what to say.

"Sit down, tell me what is your opinion of me?" asked Abdi Rathar.

"That you are a romantic young man with roving eyes and all of a sudden have got too much money which you don't know what to do with."

"True."

"What about me and my mother?" asked the girl.

"Your mother is a font of wisdom and you are intelligent," he replied.

She stared at Abdi temporarily speechless while his eyes went down to her breasts which were full and pointed. In that part of the frontier girls reach physical maturity at an early age and there was nothing of adolescence about her. She was not more than five feet in height.

While she was continuing to stare at him with eyes big and shining, the Chieftain entered and Abdi stood up. The Chieftain was wearing a black velvet cloak and wide trousers with golden braid. He had dark hair and brown eyes and black beard covered his face. His good looks were spectacular and his face had a ruthlessness about him.

Abdi Rathar made a little courtesy. "May Allah be kind to you! I understand that you are very patient and a determined young man and you want to marry my daughter, the apple of my eye," said the Sultan with a scowl. "It is proper for me to give my consent. She will make you happy. She cooks well. We have taught her that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. She learned Iranian dishes from one who is from Iran."

"Very thoughtful of you, jinab," said Abdi Rathar. He felt a spasm of pleasure at the quick decision of the Chieftain. The whole incident had a glow of unreality like a beautiful dream.

The people of Gurez appeared to him the most intelligent people. Although their territory was quite small, they had managed to live in peace with themselves and their neighbours. He thought the Chieftain to be wise, courteous, courageous and magnanimous.

The Chieftain said that he had a strange feeling like a presentiment. It appeared as if God wanted his daughter to go

to Kashmir for some mysterious purpose. "We men of the mountains have strong feeling and presentiments", continued the Chieftain. Pushing his own thoughts aside, Abdi Rathar got up to leave and thus the meeting came to an end amidst joy.

Then soon after the marriage was performed according to the Islamic law and custom. Next day there was feasting and singing and dancing. It was late when it all was over—the dinner, the dance and the musical concert. It was more than one hour when the last guest had departed in the blaze of torches. The whole room, so crowded and sparkling, noisy with laughter and music an hour ago, was now silent and dark, except for the silvery shafts of the moonlight slanting through the small window. He sat down in an attitude of relaxed thoughtfulness. Then his wife came sparkling and shining and beautiful. Both were tired, drowsy and a little sad, content to enjoy the silence of the night in each other's company. They were lost in their thoughts till they fell asleep, limbs entwined and clinging to each other.

Abdi Rathar enjoyed the love and beauty of his wife, the singing and dancing of the people of Gurez which was an expression of their physical response to the joy and beauty of nature around them. When life is sweet the time flies swiftly on its wings. Days, months and years passed and Abdi never noticed it. His father-in-law, the Chieftain, died and his wife went to live with one of her sons. Finding no prospects in Gurez, Abdi, along with his wife, came to Srinagar to live in his old ancestral house, where his parents and uncle lived.

Abdi brought with him gold, money and material goods. His old father felt splendid, sad of course, but understanding about the whole affair. He had instantly grasped the difficulties arising from the difference of culture and breeding of the bride. "It will take some time for you to adjust. Don't worry; I will handle it," he said to his daughter-in-law. Abdi's mother was adamant at first. Her objections too were social. "My son

marrying a girl from a backward and uncivilized area like Gurez!" she exclaimed. To her a girl from Gurez was the lowest step in the social ladder. But his father was able to persuade her to accept her, for she belonged to a distinguished family of royalty, and she was a real princess.

Abdi Rathar's wife, soft and silky, had a royal grace and Abdi's cousins and neighbours thought her a real lady. "How lovely Abdi's wife is! O, what a gracious smile for everyone!" all of them said and liked her. It was all over. "We would be happy all our lives," thought Abdi.

At a village some miles from Srinagar lived his other uncles and their sons and daughters. They had moved some years ago from Srinagar which had become a cesspool of intrigues and riots. One day Abdi Rathar and his wife were invited by one of his uncles to the village and they immediately purchased a large orchard and some land there and in the course of time they also built a house there. In the house they, for the time being, stored the produce of the land and orchards.

Abdi Rathar was rich, dressed well and rubbed shoulders with big ones. His father had a small shop filled with fruits, dry fish, tobacco, ropes and mats etc. Now he thought of establishing a better one.

But life suddenly blows on our good intentions. How weak and self-deceiving are we! Soon, one night, there was a sudden alarm from the watch. The women began to scream with terror, children bawled and dogs barked. There were cries. "Kill the bastards, burn them." The Rathar mohalla was attacked by hooligans and goondas and there was fighting. Many were injured and a few were killed. Then all was calm, only the weeping of some was heard. But it struck terror in the Rathar family. Their fears came true as the two Muslim communities, the Shias and the Sunnis, were at loggerheads. Actually it was some people, who were under the pay of the

unscrupulous amirs and nobles, who instigated the miscreants and made them fight and kill someone or the other on some pretext. Earlier there was lot of communal harmony in Kashmir but now there were internal feuds and Srinagar was the centre of this kind of activity.

Abdi Rathar's house in Srinagar was an ancestral one, shared by an uncle and his sons and it was now old and in a dilapidated condition. His wife was keen to leave it and settle in the country for she loved open spaces and asked her husband that they should go and live in their new house in the village. But he thought that he would be lonely there and his business would dwindle.

"On the other hand your business will thrive there and you will become a big *zamindar* and have servants and herds of cows and goats and sheep. The people are more social there and effusive than the people of Srinagar, who are snobs. Everything in the village is charming," explained his wife. Her persistence exasperated him.

"Damn it," he exploded, "you talk nonsense. I can slap you when you nag me or misbehave. You belong to me and your mission is to keep me in good spirits and not give me a headache like this."

She gave him a look of hurt reproachfulness and tears rolled over her flushed cheeks. Disappointment fell over her face.

Then as suddenly as his anger had come, so did quickly it vanish and he felt sorry. He came forward and took her in his strong arms and their hearts mingled their beats. He kissed her and gave his consent to go to the village bag and baggage.

He left his house in Srinagar and with his parents and wife drove on horses through the bustle of Srinagar to the village, chatting easily, enjoying the afternoon sunshine. "It is more important," she told him, "to be with the man she loves

somewhere in the country where birds sing and flowers bloom than in a congested city where no birds sing and flowers bloom." In the new house she felt happy. She was living a childhood dream and the house was a part of it. She always thought of someday to live in such a house with her husband and children. She felt enthusiastic over the new found joy.

On the very first day the uncle and the cousins with their wives and sisters came and embraced them. Everybody had fallen in love with everybody. They brought cooked rice and meats and vegetables which Abdi and others ate with relish. When they had gone Abdi and his wife retired to their room. He sat on a rug which had been given to him by his father-in-law. Slowly he ran his eyes over his wife's lovely face. Day by day she had become more captivating, he realised. He caught her by the arm in order to kiss her but she was tired by the day's work and wanted to rest and sleep. Furiously she fought to free herself and said in anger:

"You never know the kind of man you have as your husband till six months have passed."

"Say, what sort of a husband I am?"

She kept silent.

"Listen, I order you to give me a kiss."

"No never, you are cruel and selfish."

Her eyes flashed and her bosom throbbed as she came forward and reluctantly offered her cheek. Actually, she was exhausted.

"No, you must first smile. Have I not fulfilled your desire in coming here and don't you think that you owe me a sweet kiss? I won't touch you till you smile."

"You are a naughty boy, though grown old."

He drew her to him and pressed his lips against her lips and he held her in his arms for quite sometime.

# 3

# *Home, Sweet Home!*

Abdul Rathar and his family found the village Chandhara to their hearts, an ideal place. It might be taken as a typical Kashmiri village in the vicinity of Pampore, a large village, rather a town, at a distance of ten miles from Srinagar on the highway and on the right bank of the river Jhelum. On either side of the road stretched hundreds of small beds in which were grown the small saffron plants. On the left of the highway, crossing the fields for two miles, one reached the end of the plateau and from there down below appeared a small valley which under the bright rays of the summer sun looked like an oval-shaped emerald basin, surrounded as it was by the sloping uplands, called *krewas*. In this valley were scattered about two hundred houses which were built of stones and mud and covered with slanting roofs of timber, thatched over with rice straw. Generally, they were two storeyed. The ground floor served the purpose of a pen for sheep and cattle as well as a warm-room for the family during the winter.

In summer, these village houses were hidden behind the luxuriant foliage of the chinar trees. Below them were the lighter shades of walnut and willow trees. And then there were a good number of white poplars standing straight up magnificently. Surrounding the village were flowers of horse-chestnuts and irises of purple, mauve and white colours. A

light blue stream coming from a sparkling spring of the village lent it a singular charm. The twittering of sparrows and other birds and the neighing of horses on the green pastures in the valley and the shepherds whistling to the flocks of sheep and cows grazing on the slopes of *krewas* broke the silence.

The village of Chandhara was thus a dream of beauty and delight, for here the charm of Nature was marvellous. But one could see the squalor, untidiness and dirt of the village houses. The physique of both men and women was excellent. They were of the medium height and of exceptional strength and could carry enormous loads. Men were, no doubt, brave and courageous. They were intelligent and excellent cultivators. A villager of Chandhara could weave good woollen cloth, make fine baskets of willow branches, build himself a house, make his own sandals of grass (*pulhor*) and weave grass mats. Abdul Rathar found the neighbours kind to their wives and children and divorce scandals were scarcely heard of. They were fond of singing and were quite social and sympathetic.

He found most of the people in the village to possess low-priced, but useful things. And these consisted of a few earthenware pots, a wooden pestle and mortar for husking *shali*, some earthen jars for storing rice and pulses, a few grass mats, a creel to carry load and some woollen blankets as beddings. They, like all Kashmiris, slept on the floor. The villager was the mainstay of national economy, yet he was ridiculed as *gama hakur* (village bull) by the city dwellers. But the villagers were all contented people and Abdi Rathar respected them and in turn was respected by them.

Quite at the entrance of the village was Abdi Rathar's house, alone at the side of the road. It was a small two storeyed house with five rooms. In front of the house was a garden where sprouted onions, *hak*, a few cabbages and chillies and brinjals. A hedge hemmed it in along the roadside. Besides farming, Abdi Rathar had engaged a group of workers who embroidered shawls. There in the village were no bad

diversions. Sometimes there were performances in a sort of open-air theatre, which was managed by professional bards and minstrels. They would perform *Bacha Nagma* (boy's dance), a musical performance in which a beautiful boy instead of a girl would dance. They would also perform some comical skits in which they would imitate some typical characters like the village headman, the *patwari* or even a farmer etc. With their wonted humour and satirical mimicry they enacted some comic scenes. Occasionally some rich zamindar on the weddings would arrange *Hafiza Nagma* where a sophisticated and a charming female dancer would take part. Abdul Rathar and his father found the evenings highly pleasant, when villagers would assemble in the village common and sit in groups, according to their age and interests. Some would tell folk tales and stories from history, older people would recite the verses of the mystic poets like Lal Ded and Nund Rishi. The headman of the village was thought to be an important man in the village. He had become a bosom friend of the Rathar family and was considered as one of the family members. Khawaja Ahmad Bath was his name. He was a wise man. He used to come daily to smoke *hooka* and take a cup of salt-tea with a salty pancake. He was full of information regarding the administration and the palace intrigues.

The barber, Sona, used to come off and on and ask for rice and salt or old clothes. He was liked by everyone for his wit and sense of irony and in conversation he was fond of proverbs and sayings with a streak of humour in them. He would narrate humourous anecdotes. He would describe the plight of a villager in the city and then say that a man of the city would tell a villager:

> "You have come from a village, what you have brought? If we come to your village what will you give?"

There was in the village a venerable Moulvi who remembered the Holy Quran verbatim and knew Persian language and literature and had a knowledge of Kashmir's history. He

was running a *maktab* (school). He also used to conduct *Nimaz*. When he would pass through a street, everyone would stand up and bow to him. He was a serious type of man and taciturn and everyone was in awe of him. He would prepare talisman for avoiding calamities. The people had tremendous faith in his talismans. The villagers supplied him grain, tea, sugar, tobacco, grass mats and other things from time to time. He lived simply and went about wearing white dress and trousers. The Moulvi of the village wore the same kind of dress as was worn by a Headman of the village except that his turban was black which was also worn by a Qazi and *Ulama*. The footwear of the Moulvi consisted of shoes made of grass.

Abdi Rathar's cousin, Zubaida would often come to chat with the Rathars. She had married another of her cousin and lived at a stone's throw from the house of Abdi Rathar. She wore the same dress as worn by men except that she had a fillet on the forehead and it was a black cloth which fell over the shoulders to the knees. She had a scrutinizing cool grey eyes. They were far-seeing and wise. She measured the standards of others by her own meticulous uprightness and there could be no greater censure of the boys and girls than the cold silence with which she expressed her disapproval of conduct that did not satisfy her exacting code. But Zubaida's mind was richly stored and her conversation, however light, was never flippant. It comforted Abdi Rathar and his father to hear her.

Abdi's wife now expanded her work to include a few mundane activities. She sometimes went to Srinagar and did marketing. She herself supervised the management of her house, even though now she had servants, males and females, to work and manage and in the afternoons she made a round of visits to her new friends and relatives. Her silken clothes were much admired. She was now a rich lady but she did not flaunt her prosperity and the people forgave her good fortune. On most of the days she received the visits of friends and relatives from Srinagar and they talked about the same things

day in and day out. It was all rather dull, but it created a semblance of social life.

Abdi Rathar was very busy leaving his house early at dawn and coming at dusk. Then he was dead tired and soon after dinner he would go to sleep. He had no time to talk to his wife and make love to her. She liked the warmth of his body in bed, the reassurance of his presence. With him around, she felt safe and the house secure. "What has happened to him? Does he hate me now?" she mused. Her mother had once told her that a man's eyes were the truest of mirrors.

And the time flowed by, busy yet placidly. Only some years back her mother-in-law had died. She was neither charming nor intelligent; on the contrar, she was absurd, homely and foolish; yet the more you knew her, the more you liked her and when asked why, you found yourself forced to repeat that she was a very nice woman. She was as tall as an average Kashmiri woman; she had a large mouth and a great hooked nose, black short-sighted eyes and big ugly hands. Her skin was lined and weather-beaten. But her husband loved her even though she used to quarrel with his only sister and brothers, all of whom were married and lived separately in comfort and had big families. She used to search her husband's pockets for money and leave him penniless in the morning. Whenever the old Rathar's wife was sick he devotedly nursed her. Once when she was ill with those fevers that baffled the local *hakim*, how many nights he had spent praying for her health! When she recovered he had brought her a parrot to divert her sad thoughts with its speech and keep her company while he himself would be at the house of some courtesan in Srinagar.

During the time of her mother-in-law Abdi's wife could not move out of her house except on some domestic task. She was hard on her and felt jealous of her good clothes and clean habits. The old Rathar loved his daughter-in-law, was good and tender to her. His big brown eyes could light up with

gentle teasing and his broad shoulders shake with laughter. He could make jokes and write verses. He loved small girls, more than boys of the neighbourhood. His love was not of words but of deeds. He would sing for them and give them bon-bons and tell them stories. But since the death of his wife he seldom left his house and remained in bed. He had a passion for music but he played for his own interest.

The old Rathar loved Abdi's wife, who understood her father-in-law and was devoted to him and thought him a good musician. She knew that one couldn't expect much from music. "How uneventful, how monotonous a life it is, yet how intense, how joyous and how so often sad," she thought. With each passing year she had learned to love her father-in-law more and more. He was an angel. Gracious? No! He could fly into rage which he almost always did when his wife quarrelled with his daughter-in-law and would sometimes forego his meals and was stubborn as a mule. In that way he made his wife see sense.

Now Abdi Rathar had become quite prosperous but he kept away from home for a long time and at night slept in a separate bed which made her musing over his habit and she found the reason. Nevertheless, it was rather humiliating. It made her feel unwanted. There was no one she could confide in. At long last she thought of telling it to Kesho Pandit's wife, who lived in their neighbourhood and whose family had great intimacy with Rathars. Her name was Sona Batni. Abdi's wife told her that for the last so many years she was not having any child and there seemed no purpose in living thus. She wept in self-pity. "She is a desirable woman and there is her husband who does not even look at her," she said to Sona Batni.

"Don't you have any fears. Pray to God. All would be well," said Sona Batni in sympathy. Abdi's wife would have liked her husband to spend some time with her as before. "How can it be possible now when he has a lot of work to do alone," she thought. "To think that only a few years ago they

were at the peak of romance and now they were facing the disaster of their conjugal love. I have no child and am destined to die a heart-broken woman!" This was her lament and she wept bitterly.

Abdi was also worried for want of a child. His life, he felt, was empty and aimless and it was no use labouring to expand his trade and work from dawn to dusk. He felt listless and neglected his work. His wife's charms no longer stirred up his lust. His melancholy vented itself in ceaseless forays towards the city and remaining away for days. He did not know how to kill the miserable time and it weighed on his hands. He would go to *Tashwan*, a colony where prostitutes and such like women lived in Srinagar. It abounded in luscious girls with red lips and fire in their loins and there Abdi enjoyed their singing and dancing.

Abdi Rathar's wife, as advised by Kesho Pandit's wife, now devoted herself to prayers and working hard at home and in her garden. She felt solace in prayers.

# 4

# *The Prophecy*

One day the old Rathar had invited some of his important friends from the city and he and his daughter-in-law together had prepared *zard pilav* and fowl and brinjal cooked together and then there was *rista* and vegetable dishes. They also drank some wine. The old Rathar took a heavy meal. In the morning he felt fever and pain in the pit of his stomach. He was crying with pain and could not come out of his bed. Outside there was the stifling heat of the summer afternoon, but the room was dim and cool. After some time he again closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Abdi Rathar's wife saw him lying peacefully in his bed, one hand on the coverlet, his head deep in the pillow. His breathing was quite. Quietly the daughter-in-law sat at his bedside and lovingly scanned his face. His eyes were closed. Then she thought of Kesho Pandit and quickly ran to his house to call him. She came back along with the Pandit. When the door opened with a creaking sound, the old Rathar awoke; he opened his eyes and the shadow of a smile drifted across his face. The friend of the family, Kesho Pandit sat down cross-legged on the mat.

""Kesho," Rathar spoke so low that the Pandit had to lean to hear him.

"How are you, Kaka?"

"Kesho," he said again and the word ended in a sob. The Pandit saw two lone tears roll slowly down the old man's cheeks. Kesho Pandit felt his pulse.

"It is an ordinary fever. I shall send you some herbs. Boil them in water and drink the decoction. You will be fit as a fiddle," said the Pandit.

"No, Kesho, I am not worried about this my illness; a bigger sickness is gnawing me at my heart. Abdi has no child. I am not going to live long. I want to see the child with my eyes...."

"May God bless you with a grandchild! You send your daughter-in-law to Crar-i-Sheriff and let her burn some candles at the tomb of the saint, Nund Rishi. Let her tie a small piece of cloth round a bar of the window there and pray that when a child is born to her she would untie it. She should also give alms and grain to the poor. Surely, she will be blessed with a child," advised Kesho Pandit.

"Kesho, I feel some sort of fears, I may die," said the old man in a whisper.

"Leave worry, I shall sing some verses of Lal Ded and Nund Rishi. It will calm you and allay your fears:

Lal Ded says:

"Idol is of stone, temple is of stone;
The temple above and the idol below are one;
Which of them wilt thou, O foolish Pandit, worship?
Cause thou the union of mind and soul."

Again,

"He who burns with love is the Lover,
His self shines like gold.
When the flame of love lights the man's heart
Then dear, will he reach the Infinite."

"Kaka, are you listening?" enquired Kesho Pandit.

"Yes, Kesho, go on reciting some more verses."

Nund Rishi says:

"The dog is barking in the compound.
O brothers! give ear and listen to (what it says):
As one sowed, so did he reap;
Thou Nund, sow, sow, sow."

Again:

"O, thou hope of the hopeless
Show me light amidst darkness;
For gone has he to Lhasa;
Expectantly I wait for him.
Sow thou the seeds of friendship
And do not destroy even the enemies."

Again:

"The oriole is in quest of flower garden;
The owl seeks out a deserted spot;
The she-jackal searches the wasteland;
The donkey searches dung and dirt."

"*Subhan Alla!* Allah-o-Akbar," sighed the old Rathar. Kesho Pandit sang many of the verses of the two mystics in a subdued tone.

"What a great mystic was Nund Rishi! These sayings touch the chords of our hearts. Sheikh Nur-ud-Din's message, Kaka, was of the soul and he spoke for the mankind as a whole. He was not of the earth nor even of any particular race and country. He belonged to the universe and his message was universal."

The old Rathar promised him that Abdi and his wife would surely go to Crar-i-Sheriff and pray at the *mazaar* of Nund Rishi. Then the Pandit left for home. The *moazzin* from the

village mosque raised his voice calling the people to the evening prayer. The old Rathar closed his eyes and listened to the resonant voice of the *Azaan* until it stopped and the old Rathar had a feeling of well-being and his fever subsided.

But then some shadow of darkness appeared on old Rathar's face. He remembered his wife and felt that she had left him when he needed her most. "There she is dead and under the earth; the worms must have set upon her body. And here he is worried about the birth of a grandchild and other mundane things. Nobody in the world is happy. Everyone is miserable. This cruel death takes away everyone, lovers, beloveds, children, husbands and wives and goes away with a hard-hearted grace bringing devastation everywhere. We are all creatures of circumstances and Fate treats everyone with its cruelty and is indifferent to the wailing of the people," mused the old Rathar. Once Kesho Pandit asked him, "Kaka, you have everything—wealth, an obedient son, house and lands and all things that a man desires, then why you are so often sad?" He replied, "Kesho, I have everything but I have not the happiness for which all things are the means."

"All things can come to you from the outside, say from your friends and others but happiness can come to you from the inside. It is up to you to turn your face from the sorrows and seek peace of mind," said Kesho.

"How can I get happiness or the peace of mind; I don't understand what you say."

"This world is an illusion and everything is transitory and is destroyed. Only God is permanent and immortal. Occupy yourself with the thought of God and pray to Him with full concentration. He who has faith in Him gets everything."

"Yes, it is time for me to retire and pass my life in worship and prayers." After a couple of days he told his son and daughter-in-law to go to Crar-i-Sheriff, light candles there and pray fervently.

Both Abdi and his wife, on one fine summer day, went to the shrine of the holy saint and prayed there. When they came out of the mausoleum of Sheikh Nur-ud-Din., called Nund Rishi, they were surrounded by beggars asking for bread and money. There were also some darveshes and sufis. Some of them waved their heads in frenzy, beating time with their feet;" Mast Qalander, God will grant you, God will grant you, God will grant you!" Most of them were wearing patched cloaks and were in rags. But Abdi saw a serious Qalandar, almost naked but for his loin cloth. He had a matted beard full of dust and dirt and his feet were naked. All the same, he was plump and healthy and there was a strange grace about him, which was enhanced by his big sparkling eyes. He was, as Abdi already knew, a *fakir* of a very high mystical order with a power to prophesy correctly. Everybody went to him and he would predict in strange words of his own accord. It was difficult to understand what he said but sometimes it was possible to find out the meaning of his words. Abdi and his wife also came near him and salaamed him. The Darvesh gazed at them and told them to look at the sky. He then cried in a frenzy;

"The moon has risen on the sky;
Its rays shine on the valley.
See, it has come out again;
Rejoice, go all and rejoice."

The *fakir* used to take nothing when offered. Abdi and his wife roamed joyfully among the booths. They came to a shop where *pakoras* and big sized *loochas* were being fried and there were sweets also. They purchased some of them and tied in a piece of cloth to take them home. They ate some apples and found everything unusually tasteful. There were no meat preparations around. Nund Rishi, it is said, was a vegetarian. They passed from one booth to the other and looked with great interest at them. Finally, they came to one where an old man had a great deal of shining jewellery for sale.

"Do you like anything that you would like to have?" Abdi Rathar asked his wife. She was happy and all the things there appeared marvellous to her. She had never seen such beautiful things and she felt happy. She selected a pair of ear-rings and bangles, wooden combs and a big mirror and other bric-a-brac. Rathar paid for them joyfully.

Riding on their horse in the evening they reached their home, and found the old man waiting anxiously for them. After talking to the father and showing him what things they had purchased at Crar-i-Sherif they went into their room and sat side by side. He was looking at her and she stared back. Her heart was throbbing and she was overwhelmed by languor and felt a strange longing for him. He sensed her desire and slowly drew near her and the restraint and the inhibition of such a long time had vanished immediately giving way to savage passion. His wife returned his kisses eagerly. Spurred by his embraces and kisses her desires mounted corresponding to his and then all was joy! She drew a deep sigh of pleasure, her eyes still closed. After a long while he drew away from her and sat up smiling. His wife lay silent beside him, her face covered by one arm. She was warm and marvelously contented and glad with every fibre of her being. She turned towards him and said lazily and shyly that she felt that the prophesy of the Darvesh would come true. "Allah-O-Akbar, God willing!" he exclaimed.

In the evening came Kesho Pandit who had a look of intuitive amusement on his face; then came the Headman and the Moulvi and they had a *kahwa* containing some almonds and spices. The flavour of the tea refreshed them and this brought loquacity in them. They talked about Nund Rishi and other *Rishis* till late in the night and then departed happily.

# 5

# *The Times, Good and Bad*

Kesho Pandit owned a shop in Chandhara where he sold grocery articles and herbs; he practised as *hakim* in the village. His shop was rendezvous for many a village folk. The Headman, the patwari, the Moulvi and the big landlord, Sheikh Ghulam Rasul, regularly came there and talked till late in the evenings. One day it was a sunset of great beauty and Kesho Pandit closed his shop and then he and Abdi Rathar, as also the Headman walked into the garden belonging to Kesho Pandit which was all in bloom, where the gay springtime stirred with life. They began to speak of politics, exchanging thoughts, not upon ideas but upon men and personalities. Kesho Pandit breathed in the fertile sweetness that was floating by him.

"Kesho, you look as sad as a willow in the rain," said the Headman to the Pandit.

"What a suffocating political atmosphere have we now! Here in our village is peace but in the city a brother is at the throat of his brother. There are riots, arson and plunder; all this makes me sad," replied Kesho

Abdi Rathar remarked, "It is for this reason that I had to come away from the city and take refuge in this quiet and peaceful village."

"Yes, what a sorry state of affairs," agreed the Headman. There was a time when Shiab-ud-Din ruled over Kashmir for eleven years. What an era of peace and plenty of Sultan Zain-ul-ul-Abidin! He alleviated the sufferings of the people and his personal character was without blemish. In his time the people of the different communities lived happily like brothers," said the Headman.

"I am grateful to him for he made every effort to help the Hindus and revive Hindu learning, repair temples. His regard for the Brahmans was amazing. It is obligatory for me to mention a curious thing that happened to him that has the strangeness of fiction. One day at the royal palace in Srinagar Zain-ul-Abidin was tossing on the sick bed. He was broken in health and the shadow of death seemed close by. He was groaning in intense pain caused by the development of a malignant boil on his body. No physician was efficient enough to cure him.

"Only Shri Bhat Hakim," said a hook-nosed noble," could cure him. The grey-heads nodded their heads in assent. But everyone was ignorant of his whereabouts. However, after ransacking the length and breadth of the country, they found him and persuaded him to treat the Sultan. His treatment proved successful."

"Great Brahman, ask for any reward, it shall be immediately granted to you," spoke the Sultan in utter gratitude.

"May the king be adorned with perfect wisdom! I want nothing for myself. If you must favour me, then ameliorate the condition of the Hindu inhabitants, who are being harassed. O *Shanshai Blund Akhtar*! grant them religious freedom and also grant general pardon for all those who have caused them untold misery and suffering," said the Pandit with agony in his voice.

"It touched the sympathetic chord in the heart of the Sultan and he was thrilled when he heard the voice of

conscience—brotherhood of man. His face lit up with a smile as Shri Bhat waited with eager expectation.

"Your wish is granted. Forthwith you are appointed officer-in-charge for the revival of human brotherhood and rehabilitation of the Hindus," said the Sultan.

When Kesho Pandit finished the story Rathar said," Well that may be true, why dispute? But do you know that the king also made the shopkeepers take an oath to uphold the standards of their trade and to prevent cheating and deceit. Nowadays everybody cheats. Those who sell rice, weigh less and mix it with dust and particles of stones. Every commodity is adulterated. Higher rates are charged according to the will of the shopkeepers and nobody checks or bothers. Life has become miserable now."

Everyone nodded. The Headman of the village, a knowledgeable person said, "Kesho, actually when the dynasty of the Sultans distinguished by great rulers like Shiabud-Din and Zain-ul-Abdin had grown weak, the power passed into the hands of the ruthless feudal *amirs* who competed with one another in the bid to exercise power in the name of a puppet here or a pretender there. While the internecine feuds between the rival leaders continued, houses, localities and bridges were burnt and hunger and famine starked the valley. Habib Shah, the last of the Sultans was deprived of his crown (in 1554 A.D.) Then came Mirza Haidar Duglat on the scene but he too was the victim of a rebellion and was killed.

"Later came the Chaks." "Who are the Chaks?" enquired Kesho Pandit.

The Headman went on to say, "Whatever their origin, in course of time, they seem to have settled in the Gilgit Hunza region as conquerors or refugees. Since then the region is known as Dardistan. But these Chaks entered Kashmir as refugees from Dardistan (Gilgit-Hunza region) in the reign of Sahadev (1305-34 A.D.) in the wake of their ruthless chief,

Pandu Chak, they extended their depredations in the northern sector in the valley between Baramulla and Sopore and became a constant menace to the people. Then Zain-ul-Abidin suppressed their marauding habits. He settled some in Kupwara and some in Trehgam. Gradually their character was transformed and they were employed as soldiers, footmen and hardy cultivators. Nothing is known of the religion of the Chaks; probably they were non-muslims but later they embraced Islam and some became the Shias under the persuasion of one Shams-ud-Din Iraqi. When Mirza Haider Duglat, the Sultan of Kashmir died, it brought Daulat Chak and Ghazi Khan Chak into political prominence. And the day when the reckless Chazi Khan Chak gauged the eyes of Daulat Chak, the rule of the Chaks came into existence.

"Now ruled Hussain Chak. But Chaks had to face the enemies within and the enemies without. They were seething with turbulence in their hearts and they had mental unrest and they could not find peace in the country. Those very people upon whom one depended, that is, feudal lords and big jagirdars, proved untrustworthy. They were unfaithful, uncontrolled, arrogant and rapacious. Fighting was a pleasant pastime for them. They were treacherous people. A feudal lord acted as a king on his land. He would collect his clansmen, peasants and shepherds and form a huge army to carry on endless battle. They felt joy in fight. These feudal nobles were Damras, Mangreys, Rainas and Saids etc. Their aim was to get more and more power.

"The Mughal spies reported to the imperial government thus : Money and power are the only things which the Kashmiri leaders cherished and for which they aimed. To talk to them of peace and loyalty would only elicit laughter from them. They were uncontrolled in lechery and immorality. These powerful clans were always at each other's throats. They could not remain united by any consideration even of blood or kinship by marriage. Perpetual enmity existed between them. Some sort of barbarianism lived on in their wild souls.

"One thing alone made them united and be friendly; it was to attack their king. If they tolerated the king's rule, it was simply because it may not pass on to other party. A king could not easily afford to oppose these feudal nobles of Kashmir."

"Poverty was like an ulcer which sapped the strength of the people in this fair and beautiful land. This happened immediately after the death of Zain-ul-Abidin". "What was the actual position then?" asked Abdi Rather.

"Because of the poverty and weakness of their kings the people could be exploited and made a gruesome play-thing of the leaders. Those who fought against the king and the Shiaism were in the pay of one chieftain; those who championed the Sunni side received money from the other chiefs and foreign agents. Outsiders gladly spent money for the spilling of the Kashmiri blood.

"No agreement had been reached between Kashmir and the Imperial power of the Mughals and the Shia-Sunni strife furnished the Mughal power with a trump card to contest with the king of Kashmir. It became, therefore, a recognised feature of the Mughal policy to strengthen the refractory landlords. Thus the unhappy valley was the cockpit of perpetual warfare, of which Yusuf Shah and Habba Khatun's fate was at length to make a close."

"You seem to have a wonderful knowledge of history. Please continue; it is most interesting," said Kesho to the Headman.

"Now Ghazi Chak, the first Chak Sultan of Kashmir had a fiery temper which made him excessively unbearable and obnoxious to his subjects. The Emperor Akbar despatched Mirza Qara Bahadur, at the head of a large body of troops to invade the country in order to deliver its inhabitants from the yoke of the tyrant. The army of Qara Bahadur was defeated. The fact remains that this defeat demoralised the Mughals to such an extent that for another 25 years Akbar made no serious attempt

to conquer Kashmir, in spite of the fact that his interest to annex the valley continued unabated. Ghazi Shah's body was leprous and after his campaign in Ladakh it became worse and he abdicated in favour of his brother Hussain Khan Shah, whom he found master of the situation.

"Now Kashmir was ruled by King Hussain Shah."

"How about Hussain Shah?" enquired Abdi Rathar.

The Headman continued to say:" He ruled justly and peacefully and attended his official duties regularly and worked hard. But he could not get peace. His own son Shankar Chak and Ahmed Khan, the son of his brother, Ghazi Chak were against him, spreading all sorts of rumours, intriguing and conspiring against him, particularly the notorious fellow Khani-i-Zaman was an utter nuisance and menace in this respect.

"Hussain Shah was a poet and, it was said, a man of liberal and secular views but Akbar was watching the condition in Kashmir and his agents sent reports to him. Many selfish and disgruntled leaders, often at loggerheads with each other, sought help from the Emperor. Akbar sent Mirza Muquim Isfani and Mir Yakub as envoys to the court of Hussain Shah. They were treated with befitting honour and both were the Shias.

"But a distressing event happened, not unusual in Srinagar. An arrogant fellow Qazi Habib, a Sunni and the Khatib (reader of prayer) struck Yusuf Mandan, a Shia with a whip. Thereupon, the latter retaliated and wounded him with a sword. He was arrested and sentenced to death by the Qazi Mulla Yusuf and Mulla Feroz. Yusuf was thus put to death. The imperial envoys, being both of the Shia faith interfered and asked Fatha Khan, the Sultan's servant-at-arms, to put the Qazi to death after parading him disgracefully through the city.

"Since then the Shia-Sunni differences assumed formidable proportions. Of course, Hussain Shah sent the envoys back with presents and also sent his daughter for marriage to prince Salim. But certain Kashmiri leaders had already reported the matter to the Emperor and as soon Mirza Muquim went back he was arrested and put to death. The presents and Hussain Shah's daughter were returned to Kashmir. This grieved the king of Kashmir and his health deteriorated."

It had become very dark and all the three men thought of going to their respective homes. They felt that the discourse was thought provoking and the time was well-spent.

PART 2

# THE LOVELY MAIDEN

Nature's masterpiece! Eternal houri of Heaven!
Flower bough in Life's Shalimar, a wine-filled jar;
The Earth's necklace, its splendid ear-rings of pearls;
O village iris! O peasent girl!

—*Amin Kamil*

## 6

# *The Moon Rises*

After many months Abdi Rathar said to his wife, "It is good that the winter with its snow and slate and chills has gone and narcissus has blossomed in our garden."

His wife shyly informed him that she was with child. She had been examined by a midwife and had been told that she would have the child by the end of August.

He was happy and advised her that she must engage the midwife till the child was born. "I know that it must be a girl though I want a boy," said Abdi Rathar.

"How do you know that it would be a girl?" questioned his wife.

"You women forget easily. Don't you remember that the Darvesh at Crar Sherif had hinted that it would be a moon-like child, a girl."

In the small village the news of pregnancy spread quickly and neighbours, friends and relatives began to pour in. Some enquired after Abdi Rathar's wife and some came to offer uncalled for advice and relate their own experiences. If she ate fish, the baby would be intelligent, said some ladies. If she ate apples it would be beautiful and healthy, said others. Some men said that if she ate lot of spices and chillies and sour

things, the baby would be dull-witted and arrogant. The woman must prefer to eat sweet things. All the same, she must satisfy her cravings. It depends upon the luck of the child what the pregnant woman longs to eat. Miscarriages can be avoided by wearing a brass bangle. Moreover, she should not sleep on the same bed with her husband.

The midwife came every now and then and examined Abdi's wife and on every visit took a seer of rice, some sugar and tea and some money.

One day the Moulvi of the village mosque paid a visit and congratulated the Rathars. He won the respect of the villagers by his piety, simplicity and sympathy.

"Motherhood," he said, "was a great gift of God to a woman, but Satan entailed some danger. Therefore, the woman must keep the name of God on her lips and give away something in charity to the poor." Moulvi Sahib was given some eggs, chicken and rice.

By the end of July when confinement was judged only a week away some relatives from Srinagar moved into Abdi's house. They slept there.

Then came Kesho Pandit. He sat in the room and asked for a *kangri* (an earthenware fire-pot) containing live coals. He put some kanthgen (incense) in the *kangri* and closed his eyes and prayed. He gave a little candy and almonds for the pregnant woman to eat and said that she would come out safe from the ordeal.

In mid-July the midwife came and installed herself in the house feeling very important. The small room was warm. Furious blasts of thunder made the window rattle and lightning seemed to streak through the chinks in the window into the room itself. No one dared say what each was thinking—that the storm in summer was ominous.

As was customary for a lying-in chamber, the room had been cleared of various domestic utensils and other objects. Now there remained only the bed of the woman on the floor. There was a wooden box with a pewter, water basin, brown cord and a knife, ointment jars and a pile of soft white cloth on it. Near the head of the bed was a very old cradle, still empty.

The village women, all perfectly silent stood close about the bed, watching what was happening there. Sympathetic anguish, pity and apprehension were the expressions they showed as they looked on.

Kesho Pandit had been looking towards the sky from the window in the other room. The moon had risen, round and gleaming, behind the fields. A silvery mist hovered above the ground and shimmering water of the stream passing through the village. The frogs croaked and in the meadows the melodious fluting of the toads rose. The shrill tremolo of the grasshoppers seemed to answer the twinkling of the stars. Now the storm had subsided and the wind had become soft and rustled in the branches of the poplars and apple-trees. From the orchards behind the house there came down the sweet light song of a nightingale. The baby gasped, gave a sneeze and opening its mouth began to yell. The woman sighed, relieved.

In the next room was the old Rathar, Abdi, Kesho and other villagers, all simple and good people, murmuring prayers. Sona Batni, Kesho's wife, who was in the pregnant woman's room got up and entered the room where men sat and informed them that with the rise of the moon, the baby had come into this world.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" enquired the old Rathar.

"Girl".

Like a pall, disappointment descended upon the room. They exchanged the glances of dejection. The birth of a girl did not come for rejoicing.

In Kashmir girls were considered very inferior creatures sent by God as a punishment to their parents, troublesome and a source of economic ruin.

"Khawaja Bai," the midwife said softly to Abdi's wife. The woman looked up. Her face was drawn and haggard with the strange gauntness of prolonged suffering and her eyes lay sunk in dark sockets. As she spoke her voice too was thin and flat scarcely above a whisper.

"Is that my baby crying?"

The midwife forced a quick bright smile.

"Yes, that is your baby—your daughter."

The baby's angry-sounding squalls filled the room.

"My daughter?" Even exhausted as she was, the woman's disappointment was unmistakable. "A girl...", she said again in a resentful tired little whisper. She continued to say, "But I had prayed at Crar-i-Sherif for a boy." Tears filled her eyes and ran from the corners, streaking across her temples; the head turned away wearily, as if to escape the sound of the baby's cries.

Inferior or not, the girl had to be attended to. She was washed with warm water and aromatic herbs. This done, the midwife laid her in the cradle on a small blanket.

The old Rathar, in the other room, lifted his head and with dejection told Kesho Pandit to prepare her *tekni* (a brief horoscope) for the new born, the time of her birth being the appearance of the moon on the horizon and Zoon (the moon) was declared by him to be her name. Kesho Pandit asked for a pen and paper. On a hand-made paper he made some geometric figures and filled in some alphabets in *sharda* script and all the men looked anxiously at him.

Then he heaved a sigh of relief and said:

"Now Kaka I congratulate you; she has *Brahspati* star in her eleventh house which means she will be beautiful, have a sweet voice, learning and wisdom and will be a good musician and poetess. Again, she had *Shukar* star in the same house and she will live in the palaces and enjoy life. Her name will, according to other stars, last till the sun and the moon will last. Yes, she will be beautiful as the moon. All her stars agreed that the child will be favoured by destiny and she would one day become a queen."

Kesho Pandit was not strong and handsome. He was small and frail and half-blind in one eye. But his beauty was the intelligence and wisdom that shone on his face; his only strength was the greatness of his soul. All and sundry even the Muslims believed in the predictions of Kesho Pandit. He was a competent fortune-teller. All felt overjoyed and the old Rathar distributed almonds and crystalline sugar at the melodramatic future that had been promised to the new born. Abdi Rathar himself prepared a special *kawah* containing almonds and some spices. He asked for other details about her future from Kesho. "Because her *Chanderama* is bad, she will remain worried," said the Pandit.

Abdi Rathar got up and entered his wife's room. All the women except his aunt had left. He tenderly smiled at his wife and assured her that he was pleased with the birth of the daughter.

"How so?"

"Kesho Pandit had made her *tekni* and predicted that she would be like the moon and be most beautiful and rich and be a queen."

She felt convinced. "How could the girl be great?" she thought and told so to her husband. Abdi Rathar had no answer for that. Love marriages in Kashmir were never heard of so that he could hope that some rich man will fall in love with her and take her as his wife. Himself Abdi Rathar had no

hope of becoming a rich magnate so that she could be married to a high personage.

"But father says that he would give her a good education fit for a lady of high status and teach her music and then some prince might marry her. God's ways are mysterious."

She looked at him, moving her head on the pillow in astonishment. She thought it a fairy tale she had heard from her mother in childhood.

Then the woman asked the aunt to hand over the child to her. She took it feverishly and pressed it to her bosom. She looked at it with bashful and delightful smile. "Oh, my poor child," she said shamefacedly. "How beautiful you are—you are not a son! And yet how I love you!"

When the baby was one month old, she dressed her in new clothes and she remained in her cradle. She did little but sleep, suckle, excrete, as infants do. She would cry whenever she would need milk. Her father used to come in the morning and evening. He talked to her, tickled her sides and kissed her cheeks and she used to smile a lot. In this way she spent the winter. When May came her clothes were changed to cotton ones. She was brought in the garden and laid on a straw mat. To her the world could be nothing but a big, blooming, buzzing confusion. The sunshine pleased her and she rolled on her stomach. They engaged a maid to look after her; Mala was her name and was quite a buxom girl with black eyes.

The wife of Abdi Rathar believed that a girl should grow into a charming female, capable of captivating her husband. Therefore, every morning she bathed her in warm water after massaging her with oil. After a bath she was given milk sweetened with honey. She had sweet curds and a *kulcha* (pancake) for lunch. In this way she grew up into a strong and sturdy baby.

She was quite strong and with the help of her grandfather she would stand up and walk about. Then she tried to stand

up by herself and by many attempts she managed to walk with lurching steps. After some time she mastered to go about in a drunken gait. She also learnt to speak "Kaka", "Dadi, "Masi" etc. Later on she talked and talked in her own strange vocabulary.

Then in summer when the weather turned completely sunny and warm, she would walk into other rooms. After a year she ventured into the garden, listened to birds and watched butterflies. It became for her a magic land. In August 1556 A.D. she celebrated her fifth birthday. There was quite a fuss in the house. A number of guests had been invited from the town. Some boys and girls had come from the neigbouring houses. They had a sumptuous meal of rice, chicken curry and vegetables. The boys and girls played in the garden. The city people stayed for a couple of days and then went away after giving Zoon some toys.

A few days later she went to the town where lived her father's uncle. There she noticed a boy sitting at the window overlooking a small garden and the river Jhelum flowing placidly. He was playing a reed flute. He paid no attention to her but played his sweet music. After a while he signalled her to come and she came near him. She asked him many questions but he went on playing the flute as if she did not exist. When he finished playing she told him that it was so delightful. He smiled at her admiration and she thought that he had the prettiest smile in the world. He told her that he was eight years old.

After that they became friends and next day in the evening she went into the garden and saw him there. The moon was shining in the sky. The boy said in his innocent way:

"Look there is the moon. Your name is also Moon(Zoon). You are also like it beautiful and pale."

She felt shy and then he sang a folk song and taught her also how to sing it. She quickly learnt it and when she

returned to her village she thought of him off and on and used to hum the song learnt from him.

Shortly after her return from Srinagar her father's maternal uncle came and he was sitting in the room on the second storey. He heard many sounds of birds like pigeons, parrots, maina, nightingale and sparrow and others. The uncle was astonished for there was not a single bird anywhere nor had they any canary. Where could these sweet sounds come from? Then Abdi came out in the corridor and found Zoon making these sounds. He brought her in and said "Uncle! Here is the nightingale, parrot and other birds! She also knows how to sing".

"O, wonderful, sing a song for me, good girl," said the uncle. And she sang a folk song. The uncle was delighted. "She can become a good singer if she is taught. She has talent. Send her to my house when she grows, permit me to take her under my care for moulding the child's genius. Disciplined under proper teaching she can be a great singer," said the uncle.

Then came winter; she caught bad cold and cough and her throat was soar. Her father became worried lest she should loose her sweet voice and talk hoarsely as she did then. Kesho Pandit was called. He took her arm and felt her pulse. He told them that her feet should be washed in hot water and nothing should be given to her for eating. She could take only *kawah* with condiments in it. He would send some herbs—*kazaban*, *sepistan* and *bunafsha*. These should be boiled in water and the water decanted and the liquid taken hot, of course, sweetened with sugar. At night she should tie *bunafsha* flowers boiled in milk round her throat. She should wrap her neck with a woollen cloth. This was done and after three days she was quite fit.

In July she was again taken to her uncle's house in Srinagar. The first thing she did was to find out her cousin.

He was not at his usual place, at the window or in the garden. But he was writing on a tablet in his room. She told him to leave writing and come out in the garden and he declined for he had a lot of work to do and would not like to waste time. Then she began to weep and he kissed her and she smiled and they went into the garden and played there. That very evening she and her father returned to the village and at night she wept in the bed and thought of her cousin and missed him for quite some time.

There were other children in the neighbouring houses. One was of Lones and he was a good looking boy though dull. He was called Aziz. Zoon liked to go out and play in the garden. And when her mother was busy, the little girl would escape from the house and go in the field and watch the farmers working and singing folk songs. At first her parents used to run after her and bring her back. Then they got used to letting her go alone, only she should not go too far away.

Her grandfather had tremendous affection for his granddaughter. He often used to take her with him on his evening walks. The little child used to trot by his side and give her hand. They used to go by the roads across the ploughed fields, which smelled strong and good. The child would often ask him to tell a story. It was good to find in her a willing audience. He loved to tell episodes from his own life or stories of fairies and princesses. His voice would then become emphatic and filled with emotion and would tremble with a strong joy, which he tried to stifle.

His face would glow as he told of incredible deeds of heroism and his heart leapt when the child asked in a voice choking with impatience: "And then grandfather?" Hearing this his heart swelled with joy and pride in the tale of the heroic deeds. There were moral thoughts generally traceable in them, honest but a little trite.

# 7

# *The Blooming Flower*

The baby grew into a lovely little girl and as the years rolled on her beauty became so ravishing that anyone who once set his eyes upon her could not forget her but continued to talk of her wondrous eyes, her magic smile and her fairy-like feet. She was now eight years old.

One morning an old bearded man came. He walked in a shuffle, leaning on a cane. Smiling he took Zoon by the hand and gave her a book and one small wooden tablet and a weed-pen and from white earth he prepared ink in a small earthen pot. That day he told her who the Holy Prophet was and taught her a few Arabic alphabets. He was a superb story-teller with a flair for drama and a gift for mimicry. After a few months she was sent to a *maktab* (school) near the village mosque where a Moulvi took classes. There her education began in earnest. There she also, in due course, learnt Arabic and Persian words. With a solid dry piece of white chalk she wrote letters on a slate which she used to wipe clean with a rag. Six months later she could read and write simple words. She was also shown how to make ink by pounding charcoal to dust and mixing it with soot, gum and some water. Her grandfather gave her a crow quill so that she might learn to write on paper.

Her mother was strict who taught her how to clean her teeth with black powder made by burning the outer covering of almonds or a piece of bark of a walnut tree. She also taught her how to wash her hair and face with curd and rice-flour and at night apply turmeric paste to her face, arms and legs.

"If you take food with your full hand instead of taking it with three fingers you will be called a dog. If you take big mouthfuls and chew noisily you will be considered a donkey and if you licked your fingers or wipe them on your sleeve, you will be thought as an uncouth dirty girl. You must wash your hands and wipe them with some piece of cloth. A young lady should not belch or scratch herself in the course of eating. You are not allowed to spit on the floor or rub your nose with the back of your hand", advised her mother. She was also told by her mother how to greet and courtesy and what to do when she wanted suddenly to blow the nose and not spit before anybody.

She spent a great deal of time in her father's shop, which was but a room in the ground floor of their house, busying herself with embroidery in a quiet corner and it was perhaps from the court ladies who visited the shop that she learned her manners and acquired her air of good breeding.

One day Moulvi Sahib came and reported to the old Rathar and her parents: "Zoon is improving day by day in stature, beauty and wisdom. She is a promising girl and has learnt the Holy Quran and Persian books like *Gulistan* and *Bostan*. She is so accomplished that the like of her cannot be seen in Kashmir whether among the noble and high damsels of the city or the maidens of the villages."

Then many more years passed and Zoon's development was no less speedy than it was thorough. Soon she learnt Persian poetry and herself expressed in verse, Kashmiri or Persian. When she felt sad or emotionally tense she expressed her thoughts in metrical form. Her cousin from Srinagar used

to visit them; his name was Ahmed. He had thick black hair and fiery eyes. He composed beautiful poems and knew how to play on *sarangi* and sing. He taught these things to Zoon also. Once, on his asking, Zoon composed a poem and gave it to him for perusal. He read thus:

The drops of sweat fall like pearls from my brow
I, a dear damsel, gather violets for my Love.

At Shalimar I fill the goblets of wine
And leap for joy, for here my Love will come;
I also weave garlands of flowers for my Love.

At Ishbar I fill goblets of wine
And braid my tresses, for here my Love will come;
I also weave garlands of flowers for my Love
I, a lovely maiden, gather violets for my Love.

"Beautiful! You will become a wonderful poetess," exclaimed the boy admiringly. The old Rathar felt great love for the boy and thought of marrying Zoon to him when they grew.

One day the cousin Ahmed and she had been wandering about. There was an apple tree on the roadside. Ahmed climbed up and perched on a branch threw apples to Zoon, who collected them in a heap on the ground. "Ahmed, up there on that branch are big and red apples. Climb there and throw them down to me," cried Zoon to Ahmed. Ahmed felt excited and he went up and up for the apples when the branch gave way under the weight of Ahmed and he fell down with a thud on the ground, fracturing his knee. He was groaning with pain and Zoon was weeping and cursing herself when a few men, who happened to pass by, carried him to a cowherd who bound the knee in slings after putting some moist herbs on it. After quite a long time he was able to walk with a permanent limp and was disabled for life. His front teeth had broken and new protruded teeth had come out. His lips had become thick and awkward. His nose too was now a snuba one. In short, he had become ugly.

His parents, when they came to enquire after the boy's health, were sorely distressed and did not know what they could do now. After much thought and discussion he was apprenticed to Abdi Rathar who taught him embroidering and he also learnt how to sing and play on sarangi. He would sing and compose melancholic songs that would break the listener's heart. But he would feel comfort when he got a chance to be in the company of Zoon. Now his deformity and ugliness had deprived the poor boy the prospect of ever marrying her.

This boy Ahmed had a simple heart and suffered in silence and gave vent to his suffering in his beautiful lyrics, which he read to Zoon, who also wrote *Lol lyrics.* He lived the life of a good boy and was satisfied with the little he earned by embroidering. He never thought much about the origin of wealth nor about the inequality of human conditions. But at the same time, he was a fearless youth. Nevertheless, he was tender and violent and capable of the most energetic resolution. He was quite agreeable, though of a rather melancholic turn of mind and prejudiced against everything, very skeptical and fond of tearing hypocrisies to pieces. His life was a sort of martyrdom.

On one summer day, Zoon lay back on the heather, clasped her hands over her eyes. The heat-haze lay dreamily on the slope of the *krewa,* seeming to exert a softening influence over the continuous sound of bees and occasional calls of birds. While thinly veiling all things beyond a radius of a furlong, there was green turf everywhere save for the dry sheep-tracks winding hither and thither like brown ribbons and the broken bluish threads of easy-going streamlets. The tinkle of the water was faint—it had been growing fainter daily during the past month, but the music was sweetly insistent, compelling rest.

It must not be supposed that her days were occupied with dreaming and her nights in weeping. She had enough of labour for her hands, if not for her mind. But the summer afternoon was her own and that she spent in peace

and loneliness on the slope of a *krewa*. So she listened to the tinkle of the water, till it seemed to grow quicker-and quicker before she dozed off. But presently a youth was approaching her.

A youth with his mouth shaped to pronounce "Z"— probably he was going to say "Zoon" — stood looking down upon her. In the course of a few seconds a smile appeared on his lips, but he kept silent. For nearly a minute Ahmad remained watching the still figure. Then he turned and went quickly down the slope to the house and brought paper, pen and ink pot. Having secured what he wanted he ascended again, stepping warily to avoid sound and inwardly praying that nothing might disturb Zoon. Fortune was with him, for he wrote a poem roughly describing her features and beauty before she moved. And even then she did not wake, and, after waiting for five minutes, Ahmad could resist the temptation no longer and sat down on a mass of heather close by and began a more careful study.

The girl awoke, rubbed her eyes and stretched naturally, but gracefully.

"How dare you look on like this at me?" cried Zoon in her just rage.

"I-I beg your pardon," said Ahmad, becoming conscious that he had done something wrong, but not quite sure of the nature of his sin. "I beg your pardon, but I-I didn't think you'd wake up so soon."

"Oh!" burst out the girl, and stopped, unable to express her indignation.

"Upon my honour! I couldn't help looking at you and writing a poem. I think I have got the idea for the poem of my life. Read!"

He handed it to her and before she could grasp she had trodden it under her foot. Ahmad sprang up blazing with anger.

"You-you little fiend!" he exclaimed, "What right-?"

The youth looked at her and saw that her eyes were wet.

"I beg your pardon," he said softly. "I am very sorry."

Zoon began to walk away without a word and he leapt after her, and laid his hand on her arm.

"Have I not apologised? Have I not been punished? Then forgive me."

She gave him not so much as a glance.

"Wait," he said. "You destroyed the poem but I can write it again. Yes, I shall never forget you as I saw you sleeping," he said with a boyish simplicity. "No, I shall never forget."

She tapped her foot on the heather in a manner that suggested she was bored.

"Please let go my arm," she said.

"I quite forgot, I am holding you," he replied. "Well, I suppose you must go."

"Oh, you are absurd!"

"I agree with you, I've been fooling all my life and I am surpassing all previous follies now. What right has a brute to write a poem on beauty. But I can't help it."

She walked away from him.

When Zoon returned home an hour later, the first sight which met her eyes was that of her father and Ahmad in the garden indulging in amicable discourse. Ahmad wanted to go to Srinagar to his home that very evening to which his uncle consented. Zoon who had disappeared immediately after taking tea could not be found to bid farewell to the departing boy, who took his way homeward with a smile on his lips and tried to whistle while he remembered that he had left the bag containing his clothes at his uncle's house. It was almost dark as

he neared the house but he couldn't distinguish a figure standing by the gate; it was Zoon.

Had she recognised him in time, she would have flied, but his hand was held out to her before she could go.

"Please!" he said gently.

The time for his punishment and her revenge had come. She knew that she had power to wound him, to discomfit him cruelly, but she delayed.

"Please," he said again. And somehow she put her fingers in his.

"Friends?" he asked in a mere whisper.

"I think so," she replied softly; then broke from him and hurried into the house.

Ahmad reached home and after some days when he stirred out of bed, he could not walk and his knee had swollen and he had fever. Then they called a well-known hakim of the town. He put a dissected fish on his knees and leg and tied it with a piece of cloth. Next day the swelling burst out and a lot of pus came out which was held in a dish placed beneath the leg. For some days he felt relief and fever subsided and he had a good sleep. But again suddenly his fever rose and he felt an agonising pain and after a few days he breathed his last.

Ahmad was a boy who had grown with Zoon. For him she was not simply a beautiful and intelligent girl but virtually a fresh flower of nature or an angel come from the heaven. He thought Zoon to be a girl made for love and happiness and he understood that she could not be happy with him. It did not matter to him that he could not, owing to his handicap and ugly features, marry her but she was an inspiration to him for his songs and music and he would keep her in his heart. He wanted to be a great poet and musician and surely with his natural talent and hard work and zeal he would have achieved the eminence.

Zoon, when she heard about the tragic death of Ahmad, was shocked. She could neither sleep nor eat. There occurred some sort of emotional paralysis to her. She found his poem in her wall-shelf, eulogic in theme. This poem she read and it brought a profusion of tears in her eyes and she wept. She went to the spot where she had last met him and thought, "Ahmad was unselfish, loyal and gentle though ambitious. Fate is hostile to the one who seeks to realise a noble ideal and human effort is futile when pitted against a malignant fate, "thought Zoon. This event was a turning point in her life and she formed a pessimistic view of life. She, all of a sudden, became grave, thoughtful and mature. Ahmad and she together had written poems and they corrected each other's compositions. He was patient and devoted to her. Though her future events explain her deepening gloom but from here onwards there was an increasing tendency towards despair. As had been predicted by Kesho Pandit she was always worried and obsessed with the tragic element in the human life. No doubt, she believed that fate could sometimes be indulgent and make the dreams be realised, but life, on the whole, was pitiless and implacable.

Zoon went and roamed in the village graveyard and she said to herself, "Here are buried those who were born to eat their bread with their sweat and blood and then die and pass into oblivion. They were most miserable in their lives. For them there was no sunshine but cold winter." She again wept and returned home.

# 8

# A Tragic Event

During his last years the reigning Hussain Shah (1562-69 A.D.) was so affected by the death of his brave and able son, Ibrahim, due to small pox that he died of consumption and fever. Hussain Shah already had abdicated in favour of his brother, Ali Shah. Hussain Shah was a lover of fine arts and a poet. He was secular in his views.

Ali Shah, who ascended the throne in 1570 A.D. was kind-hearted and a man of peace. He abolished the cruel punishments and governed the country with justice and moderation and spent his time in the service of his people. No doubt, the Chaks still had the old and virile spirit but they had acquired a humanistic culture. A nobleman was expected to be a past-master in the art of war and, at the same time, proficient in the manners and refined practices of the court. It had become a fashion to wield a sword in a life-or-death struggle but also be able to strung the *sarangi* tunefully and recite ghazals to a fair mistress. The ideal of the time was that one should be skilled in fighting but at the same time be cultured. During the day the king and nobles were hunting and fighting the rebels and the pretenders but when night fell they assembled in the halls of the palaces to participate in witty conversation, read poems and enjoy singing and dancing of the sparkling damsels. The

presence of lovely and tastefully dressed dancers gave the Chak court colour and verve.

In this atmosphere grew the young and handsome prince Yusuf and he had a sensible and doting woman for a mother. She was tall but not too tall. There was paleness in her oval face and she had a wide mouth with proper curves. Her black eyes had a sparkle. Yusuf loved his mother, respected and obeyed her. She didn't approve the ways of the court and with distress she observed that Yusuf with leonine head and his matchless beauty had become the rage of Srinagar. Many girls would have liked to throw their youth and beauty, like a bouquet of flowers, at his feet. Yusuf reflected, to a great extent, the milieu he lived in. He was, no doubt, poetic, romantic, unrealistic and feudal in his ways. But actually, he had a furious desire to find true love, which always evaded him. He seemed to have been in pursuit of some personal emotional elixir, which was beyond attainment. He was afflicted with a craving for the Absolute.

Yusuf Shah, the heir apparent, was fond of song and music and would wander in the idyllic scenes and sights enjoying the splendour of nature. In him was much of indolent grace. Once his mother's sister, who was on her visit to her sister, told him:

"Darling Yusuf, I thought you intended to pay a call on me at my residence in the country".

His answer was typical of the character: "The great charm of my life is that I never do what I intend to do. It is sufficiently delightful to do nothing."

"But you are too indolent and lazy. How will you go through life?"

"Aunt, there are some like the mountain torrent, foaming and bubbling, dashing itself against stones and always hurrying. I am like a gentle brook in the valley, flowing quietly

through meadows. And both reach the same end, the sea, and are lost."

The aunt replied, "Now I can't understand your poetry—come, some day to Bandipora, will you?"

Though she was over fifty, save for the soft white hair, time had dealt leniently with her. Even now scarcely a wrinkle was to be seen, her stately figure was still unbent. The kind brown eyes were still smiling with sympathy for the sorrowing or rejoicing in another's joy.

The prince promised her that he would surely come to pay her a visit. Everyone knew Yusuf Shah for a good fellow and a gentleman, notwithstanding that he was carefree and epicurean of a sort. But can a leopard change his spots? Yes, it sometimes can. By one of fate's monstrous tricks, the one incident changed his lifestyle altogether.

One evening sitting alone in a room at her village the aunt's thoughts wandered back to bygone days. Then a rap at the door roused her and a bright young voice was asking admission.

"Auntie darling, I have some vegetables. What? Still in the dark?" And two brown eyes peered round the large bundle of vegetables that Khadija, the neighbour's daughter had brought in with her.

This girl was more than unusually attractive, a phantom of delight. Having great claim to real beauty she also possessed a pair of large and bright brown eyes, and a delicately curved mouth, whose full pink lips could laugh and pout at will. Crowning all was a wealth of curly dark hair.

Khadija was only sixteen! At sixteen, what a bright and joyous thing is life! What endless possibilities it seems to hold! At that age we think the world and all its joys have been created for us alone. We even forecast that no such a thing as

sorrow exists, and only as we grow older, either with years or experience, do we find out our mistake.

"Auntie, you were saying that the Shahzada Sahib will come today. It is getting dark and he has not come," said Khadija out of curiosity.

"Yes, he might come at any time, who can tell?"

Khadija came away and as she was crossing the road to her house, she looked up and a cloud of dust was distinctly visible upon the highway. The cloud rapidly approached, accompanied by horse's regular gallop. And, as the girl realised that the prince was coming, her sensitive lips quivered and she ran to her house.

Next day Khadija crossed the bridge and struck into the little copse.

"There is no love," said she and sighed. "Oh, for my garden!" she exclaimed wearily. "There is no such thing as love. There are only the flowers, and the spring and the sunshine."

The thicket was close-set with trees; the way was rough and thorny." I will break through!" cried Khadija angrily and tore the briars viciously from her *pheran* (outer garment). As she bent thus lowly and before she raised her head, she was aware of someone standing by. A little fear sailed across her heart. She started and looking up met the eyes of a young man.

The girl looked down: her heart throbbed fast; the fragrance of the sweet-briar stole through her senses. Khadija looked up: the sunlight flashed and sparkled on the green thicket. "Please permit me," said the stranger, and dropped upon his knees.

Khadija's bosom rose and fell as he disentangled her *pheran* from the thorns.

"I thank you, sir," she timidly said when she got on her feet.

He laughed and looked on her with smiling eyes. In the silence the stream bubbled loud behind them. Khadija moved quietly away. The young man raised his face and watched her go. She reached a little bend in the pathway and he stirred.

"I request you," he called, "pardon my interruption but the brake is grown thick and the passage is narrow. You are better on the roadway."

"I have no fears," said she, "and the road is a dreary and dusty one."

She vanished round the point. He sped after her to the corner.

"I pray you," he called," forgive my foolish importunity but the hill beyond is steep and crowned with thorns."

"I have climbed it often and iris grow upon the slope." He bit his finger meditatively as he watched her.

"Let me help you then," he cried.

"Help?" she echoed and hesitated.

She pushed aside the branches of the trees. "See," he said," they would close against a girlish arm. They are in conspiracy against maidens. Only the strong hand of the woodman bends them to his will."

"Are you a woodman?" she asked demurely.

He shook his head, laughing. "What do you think of me!"

"A mischievous gentleman. Where do you come from?"

"I came from the city yesterday and am staying with my aunt here."

"Jinab, jinab-you are then Shahazada Sahib, heir apparent, jinab?" She murmured distressfully. Khadija now tried to

walk shyly but thorns pierced her ankles. He put his arm beneath her and disentangling the thorns from her *pheran* lifted her from her feet.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Please don't do it."

"Hush," he whisphered; "it will be over soon."

"Shut your eyes and hold your breath, so shall you never set your eyes upon my horrid face. It was but a horse, an ass, an elephant that carried you over a difficult crossing."

Khadija said not a word. He jogged heavily along amid the gorse. He stumbled. Khadija clutched his shoulder tightly. He stopped and bent over her.

"Put me down!" she said imperiously, shutting her eyes.

He set her down. Khadija smoothed her *pheran*. She turned her pink face from him. They had reached an open garden surrounded by walnut trees; there were roses also. They both sat down. Khadija relaxed on the grass, her eyes dreaming and Yusuf also sat by her facing her. He was staring at her, feasting his eyes on her breasts which were full and pointed as they could be easily visible from the neck of the *pheran*.

The evening settled swiftly and the clouds drifted from the face of the moon. A cool breeze had sprung up. Khadija stared back at Yusuf, her heart throbbing; her nostrils widened and there began to steal over her some languour and a longing. Then suddenly some strong thought crossed her and she sprang up. "My mother must be anxious; I must go at once," she said in excitement.

"Alright, I bid you farewell, darling. The evening grows late, no doubt, but do you love me?"

But she kept silent and looked down. Then she said,"But you will go and forget me and leave me forlorn and destitute."

He took her hands in his own and said, "No!"

She sighed and tears came to her eyes and her sigh ran like icy cold water down his back. Then she went away without even looking at him.

When Yusuf came to Srinagar to his palace, he felt extremely gloomy and sad. His aide de camp brought a young Turkish girl with a captivating face and a lithe, sensuous body to sing Persian songs for him. But Yusuf was not interested in anything.

Then came a charming girl. Her words were magic, a promised feast to satisfy the hunger of any young man. She would sing Persian verses to the accompaniment of *rabaab*. But no! He dismissed her too. He knew that within his heart was a beautiful sensitive girl filled with love and poetry. Yusuf felt extremely sad and it appeared to him that he had come out of a wonderful fairyland and brought back to the cruel reality of sword and scheming. The village-girl, named Khadija, could be his soul-mate. But his mother or father would not approve of his marriage to her.

"Yusuf, father is not pleased with you," said his mother after a few days. "He feels that you fritter away your time philandering."

"Alas! mother I fear it too."

"He has ordered me to find a suitable bride for you, the heir-apparent of Kashmir. There is a very eligible young girl who would suit you admirably. She has a fortune; her father is a power, but she needs a husband of birth and title. The daughter of a nobleman, Margre, is the chosen bride. This is an economical and political necessity too.

But the marriage proved unfortunate. Yusuf was as impulsive and full of love of life as his wife was joyless and cold. He took sincere interest in everything but she found most things dull and tedious. His mother could understand that he valued the ties of spirit far more than the ties of flesh. Their

tastes and attitudes were diametrically opposite to each other. He loved poetry and music and sports and she had no aesthetic sense. She was proud and vain. She expected her husband to be faithful to her and to look up to her, because, after all, as she thought, she came of the oldest noble families of Kashmir. So they were rapidly growing apart.

No doubt, she had a beautiful face, small and of a somewhat pointed oval, the slight sharpness of outline corrected by a mass of cloudy hair. The complexion was of a tender pallor, suggestive of the pale rose, the mouth of soft-lipped, the large brown eyes, brilliant, yet not wanting in expression. But she had no beauty of soul; she was malicious.

Money! It was a constant problem and there was a great deficit in the country's finances which it was imperative to rectify and this was one of the ways. Moreover, his mother thought that he could not resist the onslaught of the loveliness of girls for long and she had hurried to marry him to the daughter of the noble and soon God blessed him with a son, who was named Yakub.

After a year, one lovely May day Yusuf was seated in his gilded apartment playing *rabaab* and his thoughts were wandering from music. He was contemplating on the plight of Khadija, the country girl.

He sighed and sadness took possession of him. He got up on his horse and left for his aunt's house at Bandipore.

She was amazed to behold the prince before her all of a sudden.

"How have you come, darling?" enquired his aunt.

"My heart has a reason to be here, "he replied. "Where is that Khadija, that beautiful damsel who was your neighbour? Is she married?"

"But, what is the matter?"

"Auntie, I want to take her to the palace as my consort. Although I am an epicurean of a sort but I am essentially a romantic. I believe in love—love that is service, devotion, unselfishness, idealised love." There he paused for a moment and thought with himself, "The sordid bedchamber interlude with my wife had no charm for me. It seems that I can get true love from Khadija. In her I have not to look for the gratification of a momentary desire."

"Where is she? tell me auntie?" asked Yusuf earnestly.

"Alas, my boy she died in childbirth. She was married and was made pregnant soon by that brutish husband. Her mother who loved her so dearly also died of the shock."

To Yusuf her death was a staggering blow. He felt himself contemptible and sordid. He was guilty, his heart told him. Then he forced a vacant smile; he sighed and left abruptly and returned to Srinagar.

At night he was asleep but his heart was awake. He heard the voice of Khadija saying, "Open the door for me, my Love. You didn't come. I waited and waited. I heard people speaking vaguely of riotous orgies by night and glooming awakening next day and hours spent in the company of acquaintances, not reputable. You completely forgot me and married some other girl. I must not have been beautiful. Now I have washed my locks with the dew of the night. I have washed my face and feet with cream and curd. I have put on ornaments of silver and gold and adorned myself with a dress of brocade and silk. Come, my Love, open the door."

He got up to open the door but she faded in the darkness of the night. The voice again echoed, "Now I go to feed my flock among the lilies of the valley."

He rubbed his eyes and there was only darkness. He could no longer sleep. In the morning he got up and went to the house of Amin Mustaghini, a great Kashmir poet. There

listening to his poetry he got comfort. The poet used to come regularly to the country. Yusuf used to invite the two most outstanding poets and scholars, Baba Da'ud Khaki and Sheikh Yakub Sarfi. Yusuf had the company of many more poets, learned men and musicians of repute and learnt a lot from them. Thus he himself became a poet and musician of excellence.

# 9

# *Varied Rhythms*

The sun was setting and its rays had bathed the garden and the house of Abdi Rathar with crimson and red colours. It was an enchanting evening and the workers were singing in the garden while embroidering on the delightful shawls. Zoon was listening in rapt attention. After some time, the workers collected their things and departed for their homes. Zoon felt lonely and sad; she would go nowhere. Then she heard the coughing of her grandfather who called her. She went inside.

"Zoon, my daughter, why don't you come and sit and talk to me," said her grandfather.

"Baba, I was listening to the songs. These were very pathetic," replied Zoon.

"O yes, you have a true poet's heart."

"Well, I don't mean to be contended with a poet's heart. I want to be a real poetess. I write verses myself."

"Really!"

He was taken aback by the assurance of her statement. He looked straight at her to see if she was joking. On the contrary her black eyes were pretty serious.

"O, really, "he stammered again. Have you written anything?"

"Surely."

He looked at her in astonishment. She was transfigured by the passion with which she spoke out the last word. She got up abruptly and went out and brought a note-book from her room.

"Well, will you listen to my poems?"

"Yes, do recite, better sing."

And she sang:

Friend, trip lightly to find my Love;
I've made posies from a flowery bow.
I carried wine for him across the stream
For he wanders about in secluded shades
And dwells aloof in enchanted glades.
O, where lies he in drunken stupor
Caused by my rival's spicy wine?
Should he not come to me?
Like a jessamine I shall pine
So trip lightly to find my Love.

The grandfather felt rapturous and entreated her to sing more ditties. Thus she sang:

Flowers are in bloom in far off woods
Have you not heard my lament?
Flowers are in bloom in mountain lakes;
Let us to mountain meads we mount.
The lilac are in bloom in far off woods;
Have you not heard my cry?

"Here is another one, "Zoon said.

"I seek you about the hill-streams
My Love shall I find you nowhere?
I look for you in distant woods

My Love, shall I not meet you once again?
The flowers are in bloom in mountain-lakes
Love, will you not show yourself?
Breezes play on my tresses;
Love, shall I meet you nowhere?

Zoon's parents gave her a good education as far as was possible in those times. By the time she grew up she learnt playing on several musical instruments from the apprentices in her father's workroom. The educational experience coupled with her growing beauty, charm and good humour gave her a reputation which very quickly spread to other villages. The city gallants visited her father's workroom to take a look at her but she kept them at a distance. Her grandfather began to take keen interest in her poetry. He used to admire and encourage her and he took her, off and on, to some of the good poets in Srinagar, whom he knew and they taught her prosody. On he advice of Sayyid Mubarak, a Sufi, she began to experiment with Persian metre. From childhood she delighted in reciting poems of the great poets of Persia. The exquisite poetry of Saadi sharpened her wits and generated in her great zest for singing and composing rhymes.

Time passed on and one day her distant aunt paid a visit to them after a long time. They had helped her with money and material, fcr she had not married and had adopted her nephew and lived with him in Srinagar. She seldom went out and she was fastidious about the kind of people whom she asked to see and talk to her. She hated talking idly with all and sundry and preferred to be left to her own thoughts. She felt about the world as one might feel about an inn she had supped and been unkindly treated. But she, even after her own matrimonial failure, considered marriage as the only career for women. She was still at forty quite charming. Her lovely grey pheran and her necklace of Ladakhi stones—her lover's gift—became her to perfection.

The Rathars respected her and, therefore, were very effusive in welcoming her. As soon as she came she wished them well and exchanged a pleasantry or two with Abdi and his wife, all the time smiling and laughing. She had a great liking for Zoon, whom she called to the city off and on. Zoon stood before her and thought that the aunt brought with her some aura, fresh and vital. Now she had seen Zoon after a long time and was immensely happy to find her in full bloom. Zoon, the aunt found, had a pliant little visage, a delicate and attractive oval face, a long nose, giving the features a charm and attraction. It appeared to the aunt that God had made use of His best material and skill when He created this daughter of a Kashmiri village. Her skin was wonderfully white and smooth shimmering like nacre; the hair was abundant and of a jet black colour, its beauty of texture being enhanced by a silver chain worn by Zoon; the hands were long and slim. She had a wide dark eyes, a rosebud of a mouth, good white teeth and a shapely figure enhanced by a full bust. Her intellect was illuminating, her personality scintillating and her beauty sparkling. She perfected the lol-lyric. She was musician, who by inventing Rast Raga, made a new addition to the known *ragas* of that time.

Her aunt approved Zoon's perfection and praised her deportment. Zoon was already known to be studious, amiable and pleasant, who excelled in the practice of the arts of the day, embroidering, sewing and darning and in cooking she was quite an expert. Now what was needed for the expansion of her character was love. Zoon created a powerful impression upon all those who came in contact with her.

Having a clear intelligence and a ready wit coupled with natural delight in learning, she could recite Persian orations and verse of her own composition before any number of men and scholars. She had an extraordinary good taste and could sing charmingly to the accompaniment of the *rabaab*; her embroideries on shawls were those of a gifted no less than a

trained person; her dress was always discreet and becomingly chosen, her maidenly figure looked equally well whether she was clad in the dress of a Kashmiri peasant girl or in the silken attire of a girl of high station.

"Now get up, daughter, prepare a cup of tea for me. Abdi, has she to remain unmarried like me and bear the sorrows of life on her delicate heart and shoulders?" questioned her aunt to Abdi Rather and his wife.

"No sister, I want to marry her to some noble boy in the city, but who will help?"

"This marvellous gem should adorn the palace of a king. If any amir or a noble were just to catch a glimpse of her, he would be enchanted. Behold her chiselled features, the bright big eyes and her clear ivory complexion!" In this way the conversation about her wedding and dowry and other domestic matters continued till dinner time. Then the aunt got into her bed, which was already prepared by Zoon. She came and gently pressed her legs and rubbed the soles of her feet. The aunt felt it comfortable.

"Auntie, will you tell me why you were never married? Do you remember, auntie, when I was a little girl you used to say that you would tell me when I was grown up and now I am quite grown up, so do tell me, auntie dear."

"Very well, darling." The aunt sighed and Zoon drew near her.

"In Kashmir, Zoon, marriages are arranged by our wise parents. We don't make love-marriages; these are despised and not allowed. Moreover, in the cities we never roam or go anywhere alone by ourselves and do not get the opportunity to meet young men. However, I was just of your age when I got an opportunity to meet a young man when I attended a relative's marriage. For months I had looked forward to such an occasion. But the much longed for night came at last and when I was dressed and ready to start, I thought it to be the

happiest moment of my life. The flowers, the musicians, the lights, the bright dresses and the gay people strolling hither and thither, all dazzled me and put me in mind of a fairy land. I had enjoyed myself immensely. What more could I want to make me happy? I was young!

"Soon after, I met a young man while he was coming up a narrow staircase and I was coming down. He did not allow me to pass. I looked down and showed my resentment at his blocking my way but I said nothing.

"He must have noticed my shyness. But then he smiled and abruptly kissed me. I could neither speak nor cry. After that I found him watching me and smiling. He signalled me to come out into the garden at the back of the house. I walked into the garden like a somnambulist unconsciously. There he told me that he wanted to marry me and would ask his parents to approach my parents with a proposal for marriage. He again stealthily kissed me and we parted.

"Then one day I heard that he was engaged. At first I would not believe it but when belief was forced upon me, my grief knew no bounds. Till that day I hardly realised how fond I had been of him, and the prospect of a long life without him appalled me. Full of courage and firm resolve, I picked up the thread of my daily life, and hoped not only to hide my feelings but to still the dull aching pain by study and writing divine poetry. It was very well for a bit, but the reaction was bound to come and I discovered that I must find some other remedy and that remedy was to devote myself to God and religion."

The aunt paused and in the now fast gathering darkness Zoon could discern a silent tear on her aunt's cheek while she herself was not unmoved.

"Auntie," said the girl, slipping her hand into the lady's, "when people love like that, do they even forget?"

"I don't think they ever quite forget; but time softens all grief and often leaves one better for its mark. When I found

that excitement could not heal my wound I began, in a small way, to try and find some work to do, even if it were only helping those who were suffering. My first feeling of blank and utter loneliness had worn out and I was able to settle to more regular occupation. I learnt that life still had possibilities. It is a lesson which comes to us sooner or later but perhaps I learnt it a little earlier than most."

Zoon was silent; then slowly, as if by touching on a almost sacred subject, said ;

"Auntie, is he or are they alive?" she asked.

"Yes dear both of them are alive."

Zoon slowly rose and slipped through the open door but could not close her eyes and thought what she would do if she were unfortunate enough to be jilted by some callous man.

In the morning the old Rather was found suffering from acute coughing. In fact he had often severe fits of asthma, which were relieved by the hot broth of Kesho Pandit. Then after breakfast the aunt left for Srinagar taking with her a load of vegetables and fruits. Zoon also went with her after making sure that the grandfather was feeling well and gave her permission to go.

In the evening Zoon's aunt would ask her to sing poems, which she admired. One evening she sang :

You stole my heart and forsook me at last
Pray come, my lover of flowers, oh come!

Come, friend, let us go gathering jessamines
For once the lamp is out, lit no more can be;
For his precious wealth of love, I linger and long.
Pray come, my lover of flowers, oh come!

Come, friend, let us to collecting cress,
Mystery of fate none can unravel;
Sly senseless people slander and defame me,
Pray come, my lover of flowers, oh come!

Let us to picking and plucking mellow myrtles
He has hurt me with his lover's hatchet;
Then sent some to ask and enquire after.
Pray come, my lover of flowers oh come!

Let us now go down the hill,
The gold of my ears, I'll present him;
My gift is precious and presentable.
Pray come, my lover of flowers, oh come!

Leave off your scorn and hate for me;
I long and crave but for you;
Life is short and fleeting you see;
Pray come, my lover of flowers, oh come.

Oh hearing the song showers of tears came down on the aunt's cheeks. Then she got up to wash her face and came back muttering the name of Allah and His Prophet. She was still sorrowful when Abdi Rathar came.

"Zoon, your grandfather wants you to come at once. Make haste, he is very unwell," said Abdi Rathar. Thus both Zoon and Abdi Rathar immediately left leaving the aunt alone.

After some time a man slipped in through the open door. He was panting with excitement. He said, "My wife is dying and has asked me to bring you to her. She earnestly desires that you should give her a promise that you would marry me after her death. Come, I beseech you."

He was still panting with excitement. He sat down in desperation and spoke in a tone of imploring wretchedness what he had already said.

"So your wife compels you to come here. Remember how you made me suffer all these years by your betrayal and cruelty. We can no longer be bound by the most sacred ties that can ever be formed in this world." Said Zoon's aunt whose name was Mah Jabeen.

"No, no, I was willing to marry none but you but my parents had given word to the other party without my knowledge and I was compelled to marry that girl, now on deathbed. My life is bound up in your love. I have all the time loved you with my soul. My marriage with that girl was but a farce."

Deep flush came over her face and she couldn't speak. She was silent and looking down. Then she covered her face with her hands and the tears forced their way between her fingers.

"Forgive me. I am not to be blamed. It was my misfortune that divided me from your side," said the man. Thus he pleaded, apologized and even kneeled to appease her. "I entreat you to accept me as a husband," he said in a tone of imploring wretchedness and continued, "have some pity, hear me, forgive me for the past, if not for me at least for my dying wife."

He had chosen the most effective appeal. Both of them, for some time, kept a profound silence. As placable as she was kindhearted she readily forgave his offence. Then their lips as well as their hands pledged the sincerity of their affection.

The weather had undergone a brisk change. The sky was clearing and a full moon lit up the country with its golden rays.

But at Chandhara it was a stifling night at the end of December, a cold mist hung over the village and old Rathar had gone to bring some tobacco and cloth from the neighbouring village of Pampore. He was late for evening meals and had been hurrying on foot. When he reached home he asked Zoon to be called at once. Thus Abdi rode to Srinagar and immediately got Zoon from there. When they arrived, the old man could neither speak not breathe. It was not for the first time that he had this condition but nobody had taken serious notice of it. Very reluctantly he sat at meals with them. Abdi Rathar and others were perturbed by his suffering and it was a great effort for him to gulp down a few morsels of rice. To give

time to the old man to recover none of them talked and then Zoon got up and prepared *Kahwa* and he took a sip or two of the fresh tea.

Suddenly the old Rathar waved his hands in the air and clutched his *pheran*, looked at Zoon, moaned and collapsed. Abdi sprang to his feet just in time to catch him in his arms. They were all beside themselves and screamed and cried.

"Hata Babo, ha Babo (Oh father, Ah father!) what shall we do without you? Why have you left us?" they all cried.

Zoon clung to her grandfather's body and kissed him. The neighbours heard the wailing and cries and hurried to their house. Tears were in their eyes. Kesho Pandit was sent for and he came immediately. He took the arm to feel the pulse and a mirror was placed before his mouth and then Kesho Pandit declared him dead. Death was instantaneous and he had not to suffer and struggle but his last thoughts must have been about Zoon, whom he immensely loved. Then the Rathars had to perform the dreadful duties that follow upon death.

And with the death of the old Rathar the peace and prosperity of the Rathars was also gone. It was not known how the shawl trade dwindled and Abdi Rathar had to close his workshop. The winter was most severe and it snowed all the winter. Then came April and it rained heavily and the fields were full of water. Nothing could be sown. There were no blossoms on the trees and no narcissus or any other flower appeared. They had eaten most of the grain in winter and now they had to face the famine. Their small supply of money soon gave out. Every evening with sinking hearts they took stock of the widening hole in their purse. They came face to face with the terrible struggle for life.

Abdi Rathar would go to Srinagar in search of some job but could not get any. He went to the trader who purchased the grains every year but he could not help him to tide over the

predicament. The trader offered a cup of tea and a kulcha and talked trivialities to keep the conversation going and whispered pleasantries while Abdi Rathar's heart was sinking. In the end he showed his utter inability to help Rathar. He would work on any shop or do any other useful work for which he was able enough but nobody was prepared to engage him. He borrowed from Kesho Pandit but that too was soon finished. Then he went to his uncle whom he had helped in his business till he had found his feet. But his reply cut him to the quick. He flatly refused to pay him anything and even though he was hungry he did not even ask him for a cup of tea. He sold the ornaments of his wife and the jewellery prepared for Zoon's wedding and her clothes were also sold. Abdi Rathar was quite demoralised and felt shy and timid in selling these things. He, though ordinarily quite smart and clever, had become incredibly simple and was cheated at every transaction.

Abdi's faith was beginning to crumble away unawares. God, like the mortals, seemed to have died. After his failure to get anything for their survival he went to bed and tried to sleep but he could not close his eyes. "God is merciful and he who prays to Him from the heart, He surely helps, la illa a il illa, Mahmed Rasul Allah". There is one Allah and Mohammed is His Messenger, he spoke softly, tears rolling down his eyes. He got up and prayed the whole night. In the morning what he saw was that the rain which was continuously pouring throughout the night had stopped and the sun had come out smiling and in full brilliance. He got up late and was informed that a trader in grains from Srinagar was waiting for him on the ground floor. Abdi used to sell him grain every year. When he had gone to borrow some money from him, he had humiliated him but he had come with the articles of food, sugar, tea, rice and money. Abdi Rathar was not amazed as he was convinced after the prayers that something would turn up. It was a very precarious situation for Abdi. It did not matter if he were to starve but his faith in the mercy of God

would have been shattered. Everywhere he had faced ingratitude and selfishness. Now again the fields were sown, the normal goings-on of life started and the crops that year were rich.

Zoon, as before, delighted in reciting the musical composition of the great poets of the valley. The exquisite poetry of Saadi was recited again and again and both for Zoon and her father music was a paradise in their existence. The workers had gone but still they used to come together on the weekend holiday and hold a sort of musical concert. So they too like Zoon and her father were the suffering souls who took refuge under the motherly wing of music. Zoon had a light mezzo voice, plaintive and delicate and the concert at the end of the week was like a ray of light, that shone through the week of unceasing toil. In this way the lives of the poor people were built on ardent faith fashioned by a sort of Kashmiri stoicism.

# 10

# *The Royal Visitor*

It was mid-winter. The prospect of the village of Chandhara was quite dreary and cold and a graveyard silence prevailed at the late hour of the snowy evening. The moon appeared dull, wasting and greenish-yellow and shining over the vast expanse.

It was such a cheerless evening when even the most gay person would feel sorrow and hope sinks to misgiving and there is no anticipation of anything good. But life is full of paradoxes. The scene was a small public path of Chandhara, bordered on the left hand by a line of irregular mud houses of farmers and on the right was a vast tract of land containing leafless trees—apples, pears, cherries and walnuts etc., enclosed by hedges and poplar trees, reaching at the remote verge to a wide undulating upland of Pampore, where grew saffron.

From the cottages the smoke was coming out through the windows, for there were no chimneys. This meant that the folk were busy in cooking. Among these farm-houses, there was one house far better than others and was made of timber and stone.

Now the darkness had advanced and a gusty wind swept over the village. The cold was intense and the night appeared

gloomy and sad — the sort of night when one can imagine spirits abroad. When the howling of wind abated a sinister sound would occasionally roll the night — a far off boom that held within it the voice of death.

Abdi Rathar himself was oppressed by sorrow due to the rememberance of his father, as if his soul was hovering restlessly outside in the bitter cold. All others sat round him near the smouldering fire in the hearth and tried to distract his mind with their conversation.

"What is this sound of the guns heard from time to time?" enquired Zoon of her father.

"Daughter, it is men, rather soldiers, out hunting," replied her father.

"But why in such a cold and dreary night?"

"Because the wild animals and ducks come down from the hills into the plains," replied Rathar.

Not long after, a form on a horseback moved outside by the brink of the path. He was looking at the cottages till he saw the better farmstead of the Rathars where light appeared through the chinks of the windows in the first floor. Now to the inmates of the house the tramp of a horse was apparent, approaching the front of the house. The paces slackened, turned in at the wicket and came up the mossy path close to the house door. The door was tapped with a stick. "Who is there?", called Abdi Rathar.

"A traveller, please", was the reply.

Abdi Rathar came down to see the man.

"What do you want, brother?"

"You see, I have come from the city. I was hunting ducks. There are plenty of them in these parts. I came ahead of my companions and I lost my way and wandered till I spied this village. Then I saw the light in your house."

Abdi examined the man from head to foot. Undoubtedly, he was not a tramp or a vagabond but a man of respectability, may be a nobleman.

"Oh, you are shivering. Excuse me, please. Do come in," said Abdi Rathar to the visitor.

He climbed the stairs and found himself in a cosy little room. He felt easy. Zoon saw the man, handsome, rather stern-looking but rich and her heart was fluttering under some mysterious influence. In fact, she was given to see visions and dreams in which a prince would come down from the clouds on a flying horse and carry her up towards the moon and the stars; her head was filled with such fanciful things. The man saw the girl and felt embarrassed and muttered to her rather incoherently, "A cup of tea, *kawah*, hot—can I have one?" Zoon seemed to experience mirth and she enjoyed it.

The visitor had a cup of tea which brought colour to his face and then he felt at ease. Zoon was not shy and talked to the stranger. Actually, the common women and maidens in Kashmir would go about unveiled and not hesitate to talk to men freely. It was the higher section of the society that absorbed *purdah*.

They served him vegetables and chicken curry and potatoes stewed for dinner and then *rogen josh*. He was very hungry and felt the dinner most delicious. Then after dinner they asked him, as was natural, to stay and rest for the night in their humble abode, as they called it. The man readily consented.

He was conducted to the sleeping room, which was like a small sanctuary. The bed was already made on the floor. There was a blue quilt, the snowy white sheets and the pillow spreads with the word 'Zoon' embroidered. All had brilliant and cheerful appearance. There was also a walnut box, a gilt framed mirror and some books and in a corner a *sarangi* which added to the general air of comfort and coziness.

Next day the bright light of the day was peering in through the chinks of the closed windows. Then Abdi came and opened the windows; the sun had appeared which threw a mysterious yellow glow over beautiful glazed earthenware cups and a jar lying in the room. The handsome youngman lay there languid and contented; he had slept well and had not been awakened by anyone. Then Abdi Rathar came and told him to have a cup of tea. He got out of the bed and did his ablutions and sat against a bolster behind him. Soon Zoon entered the room dressed in her embroidered white *pheran* and greeted the man and handed him a cup of tea. He afterwards asked her for the *sarangi*. Zoon handed over to him the instrument and he played on it and sang:

Wherever the rain falls, there grow
Crops and fruits in plenty;
Wherever the spring comes, thither comes Love,
The Lord of spring.
The iris, the lily and the meadow saffron
Will sprout soon.
Come, O narcissus, enjoy the bloom!
The winter is gone; the dandelions and the viburnum
Have blossomed in the woods;
Spring has come and Love, the Lord of spring,
has come joyfully too."

Abdi Rathar, who was present in the room, told the visitor that the song had been composed by his daughter. She was a poetess and her songs were very popular.

"Is it so? Wonderful!"

"She knows how to play on *rabaab* and *sarangi* and has an astonishing knowledge of History and Persian literature."

"Oh, sorry, I must leave the house immediately for my companions and my parents at home must be in great distress at my night's absence. I may call at you again and sweeten my ears with your daughter's songs and the discourse on History," said Yusuf.

So Yusuf stood up, put on his shoes and looked at Zoon with charming modesty and left accompanied by Abdi Rathar. On the way Yusuf asked the names of his wife and daughter.

"Excuse me for asking the names of your members of the family, it is impolite no doubt but I am interested in your welfare. Is your daughter married?" asked the visitor.

"No, but I have to get her married soon, for I am troubled by many persons who seek her hand."

The visitor beamed with joy, as if instinctively, to know that she was unmarried.

"What about you? Are you in the army or some nobleman?"

The visitor laughed. "Never mind, who I am. I am grateful to you for your wonderful hospitality. Have this money."

"No, no, jinab, we don't sell our hospitality. It is our duty to serve a traveller in difficulty. Every villager in Kashmir does it. No, thanks."

"Well, then take this ring as gift from me to your daughter. This is from me, Yusuf Shah Chak."

"Jinab, then you are the great prince! May God preserve you!" Abdi bowed and took the ring with many thanks. They had reached the high road and were near Pampore. The prince ambled away, his head full of romantic thoughts.

Abdi Rathar came back and told his wife and daughter who the young man was and showed them the ring. They were all struck with astonishment.

Soon there was a disheartening drizzle outside and Zoon was sitting at the window feeling the warmth of a wild exhilaration and was humming a poem in her mind. Being essentially a visionary, her heart was fluttering with romantic possibility. The vision of a handsome face of the prince had a

tickling effect upon her and it troubled her much to think that she did not know that the visitor was a prince.

Yusuf felt that she greeted him with warmth and expansion and spared herself no pains to give him pleasure. He could not marry her; his mother whom he respected would not allow him to marry a common rustic girl. She believed that by marrying a girl of low ancestry, the blood stream of the prince's father might be polluted. A child born of such a union always turns out vicious, lying and cruel. He could have taken her as concubine but that would have been a great sin. Now his loneliness weighed upon him more than ever and he tried to forget Zoon. He was almost mad in his effort not to listen to the voice of his heart, which overwhelmed him with reproaches.

It spread like wild fire in the village that there was an amorous meeting between the prince and Zoon.

Zoon's fame of beauty and accomplishments spread all around and people used to come and feast their eyes on her beauty while she was about. She passed through curious people and they flocked to catch a sight of her. Whenever she used to go to fetch water from the spring or collect dandelions and other vegetables, young men used to ogle, make catcalls and even tease her. There was one Ramzana who was very overbearing and arrogant; he harrassed her. She had to put up with his unwelcome attentions when she came home at nightfall. She suffered agonies from the fear of being accosted and followed by him and forced to listen to his insulting advances. Ramzana had been a servant of Narain Joo, a Brahmin of Srinagar who owned a piece of land at Pampore, and was son of Rasul Bhat, a local man, was in charge of this land. He engaged labourers and got the rice sown and harvested for the Pandit. The Pandit was a revenue official. Once on his visit to the land he caught sight of Rasul Bhat's son, Ramzana, and took him to Srinagar and appointed him as a domestic servant. The Pandit was a kind-hearted man and finding the boy

handsome and intelligent taught him the rudiments of Persian, maths and revenue official routine. The lad, when he grew, was helpful to him in managing the land and in his official work; he had him appointed in his office also.

In due course, the lad amassed a good amount, came back to his village and opened a small shop where he sold salt, sugar, tea and cloth etc., and clandestinely some liquor too. Ramzan Bhat had also learnt from the Pandit the skill in gaining possession of fertile lands by granting sums of money on their title deeds. This very Pandit, who had now died, also had taught him considerable legal lore, which he used for his own selfish end. Ramzana had thus become prosperous. He was married but the older he grew the more lustful he became. He had, off and on, seen Zoon going to fetch water from the spring or collect dung and vegetables from fields and had developed infatuation for her. He used to pay attention to her and tease her whenever he met her in the way but she paid no heed to him and instead abused him.

The people used to get tobacco, cloth and other things from his shop on loan. He started a campaign of maligning Zoon, telling the people that it didn't become an unmarried girl to go about attired in her best in coquettish manner and sing romantic songs. He even went to the extent of slandering her and said that the prince would often have amorous meetings with her at her house.

Precocious fame of her beauty and singing in a small village is fraught with great disadvantages; it made Zoon a marked girl who was pointed out and talked about by everybody. Her father got frightened and thought hurriedly to marry her off. Her parents approached an ugly man, Mohmadu, the middleman who arranged marriages.

PART 3

# THE UNHAPPY MARRIAGE

With happy songs I was greeted
And hailed as the Fortune's own duaghter;
My in-laws were eagerly waiting for me;
A palanquin decked with bright silver
Had been sent for me.
Ah! let no one lose his years of youth!

*—Habba Khatoon*

# 11

# *The Ill-Omened Wedding*

That was an age when eve-teasing had become a craze in the cities and towns of Kashmir and to seduce a pretty girl was considered a feather in the cap of an unscrupulous youngman. Abdi Rathar quickly came to the conclusion that the best way to protect his daughter of sparkling beauty from the wolves would be to marry her off immediately, so he began to look for a suitable husband for her.

"Your daughter, brother Abdi, has reached the marriageable age and you are complacent and sleeping," said Mohamdoo, the middleman one day to Abdi Rathar when he was going to the town.

"Yes, I would like to be relieved of the responsibility as soon as possible. Ours, as you know, is a well-to-do family and my daughter is beautiful, educated and can embroider and is accomplished in many ways. I don't want to proceed to extol the virtues and talents of my daughter but I must have a suitable boy from the town," replied Abdi.

The middleman winced. He had been promised a good reward in cash and kind by the Lone family of the village of Chandhara itself, if he could marry their son to Zoon. Mahamdoo was a tall imposing man with a serious and venerable demeanour. He was greedy and a glutton and had a glib

tongue. Falsehood and cunning were the hall-mark of his tribe. The Lone family, undoubtedly, was quite respectable and they had a lot of land but the boy, named Aziz, for whom a wife was being sought, was an illiterate, dull-witted and boorish young peasant. Some even said that he would also drink alcohol. Nobody was inclined to give his daughter in marriage to him.

Majority of the Muslims in Kashmir married their daughters to their relatives but if, unfortunately, none was found eligible amongst them, they would seek some one outside their clan. So was the case with Zoon. No boy was found among her relatives to whom they could marry her, so Abdi Rathar was compelled to utilize the services of the go-between by whom one was liable to be deceived. The middleman generally spoke in a sweet way about the gentleness and riches and virtues of his client, which would be either wrong or exaggerated. Thus Mohamdoo told Abdi in a confidential and sympathetic manner, "Marrying your daughter in the city would involve lot of money and lot of other things. Morover, with all her good qualities she will be looked down by her in-laws as being a rustic girl and you know a mother-in-law of the city is greedy and cruel towards her daughter-in-law. It will be hard for your daughter to adjust with the city people. If you listen to my advice, you marry your daughter to Aziz Lone, a gentle and noble boy. Zoon will rule there, believe me," said the middleman.

"But Mohamdoo, the boy is illiterate."

"What of that, he is a Zamindar and he has not to become a teacher or a clerk," said Mohamdoo, giving a noisy laugh. He enthusiastically eulogised the boy.

"Well, as you wish, go ahead with the negotiations. Consider Zoon as your daughter and look to her well-being."

"I swear by the Holy Book, I shall try my best for her but I doubt if the Lones would agree in fostering the relation,

knowing the status of the family. I shall ask you for a good reward when I succeed," said Mohamdoo after drinking a lot of tea and eating a plenty of bread.

Aziz's parents, naturally, readily agreed to get the daughter of Rathar for their boy. Mahamdoo had given them the bait of handsome presents and gifts, It was the year 1564 A.D. when Aziz Lone's father went with a small party of relatives and friends along with his son to Abdi Rathar's house where they were sumptuously entertained. There were also present Rathar's close relatives and friends. Zoon was called before the Moulvi who asked her thrice if the boy was acceptable to her. She murmured 'yes' three times. The boy also repeated the same process of saying 'yes' thrice. Then a contract was drawn in which the *Mehr* was mentioned. After this the Moulvi declared the betrothal and verses from the Holy Quran were recited by him. Then the valuable presents were exchanged by the two parties. Afterwards, on a few holy days, Aziz's father sent presents for Zoon which were reciprocated with more valuable presents for Aziz by Abdi Rathar. At last the date of the wedding was fixed. Both the houses distributed yellow rice to the neighbours. All the relatives were informed of the coming wedding. For seven days before the marriage ceremonial festivities and rejoicings were held and the invitations were sent to the relatives and friends. Soon the guests began to pour in and preparations for the marriage started in full swing. Abdi Rathar's house was full and a neighbour's house was used to accommodate the guests and food was prepared outside in the garden under a small canopy by the professional cooks. There was a lot of hustle and bustle and a lot of noise—men telling of their own weddings, women singing and beating the *tumbaknaris* in a rhythm and the children singing the nonsensical rhymes.

There were some persons shouting unnecessarily, only to make others feel their importance. The women were also busy in arranging the clothes of the bride and the bridegroom.

The day before the wedding the bride's dress arrived. There were seven *pherans* of different colours and matching *shalwars* and some silver jewellery for the bride. A quantity of *mendi* dye from Aziz's father for Zoon to paint her hands and feet with the red colour. Besides, there were almonds, crystallized sugar and dates. One of the relatives, who accompanied the man carrying these things, handed Zoon a purse containing some money. The women surrounded the bride and sang a song composed by Zoon herself. They were known as lol-lyrics and were very popular:

He who has killed every fabric of me
I long for a sight of him.
He looked at me over the wall
I would present him a fine *tosh* shawl.
Why he feels annoyed with me;
I have been since long yearning for him.
Slyly he peered through the door;
Who led him to my house?
Every part of my body is now in pain
For long I have been yearning for him.

Abdi Rathar was happy and was enjoying puffs at the hookah when his wife came there and gave him a coquetish smile.

"Ah, you have put on new clothes, eyes blackened with collyrium and hair oiled. A-hah! you are out to kill; some one will be half dead while some other will be completely dead at seeing you," said Abdi jokingly.

With a jerk of her body she said, "Hai, hai, if anybody were to hear, what will he say. You are also attired in your best as if you are to bring home a fourteen-year-old fairy."

"I cannot manage one, what to say of another one and that too young."

Then they both laughed together.

When the day of marriage arrived Abdi Rathar was feeling nervous. The bridegroom's clothes were sent and the time for the ceremony fixed at nightfall. Some presents and the palanquin were sent ahead to the bride's house.

The bridegroom, dressed like a Sultan, and decked with the best clothing, left for the bride's house riding on a gaily caparisoned horse and accompanied by about seventy guests and men carrying lighted torches. The ladies followed the bridegroom for a little distance when he departed. They first visited a nearby shrine of a Sufi saint and said prayers there and then went ahead. In front of the procession were the flute players who played on their instruments with zest. As the procession drew near Rathar's house the women came out singing.

There were some songs which clearly welcomed the bridegroom's party and praised the groom's qualities. The marriage party was received by Abdi Rathar and relatives and neighbours; Aziz, his father and uncles were garlanded. They were all led into a wide decorated space covered with a magnificent *shamiana*. The place was covered with carpets. The groom was invited to sit on a special place on cushions and then the feast commenced winding up with tea.

The marriage ceremony was performed by the highly esteemed Moulvi of the village mosque. He recited the verses from the holy Quran and asked Aziz thrice if he was ready to accept Zoon as his wife in lieu of hundred drams as Mehr to be paid if the marriage is annuled. Aziz Lone replied in the affirmative as he had done at the time of betrothal. At this time a curious sadness gripped Zoon's heart and she wanted to cry. Tears rolled down her cheeks. It was an ill omen to weep on this occasion. But she could not help it. Did it bode ill for her future? Abdi Rathar wept as it meant the complete separation from her daughter. When the ceremony was over everybody raised his hands in prayers for the happiness of the couple.

Then the dates and almonds were thrown in all directions which were picked by children and some women. Tea boiling in a large samovar was brought and served to the guests in glazed earthenware cups. Everybody was happy and the musicians played upon drums, and lute. The singers provided befitting melodies

Inside the house Mahamdoo, the middleman was feeling cheerful and happy, more so on the success of his effort. There was an old woman with a snub nose and no teeth in her mouth which gave her face the look of a broad disc, giving her a sinister and ugly look. While the women sang and put incense in the *kangari* containing live coals, she danced in a ludicrous manner, making lewd gestures and everybody's sides ached with laughter. But Abdi Rathar was horrified and he felt it as a macabre dance of bad luck.

It was midnight and the bridegroom was called inside the house where he was brought face to face with his bride. In the room and the corridor the cousins and the relatives of the bride were collected to have a glimpse of the groom. The women were decked out in their finest clothes and glittering jewellery. In their gorgeous attire these Kashmiri belles appeared like houries of paradise. Then the groom was welcomed by his exquisitely beautiful mother-in-law and other relatives.

After some time the bride and the bridegroom had to see each other's faces. It was quite an elaborate ceremony. They had to sit opposite each other and a copy of the Holy Quaran and a mirror was placed between them. They had to see their faces in the mirror. It was impossible to see the bride's face in the mirror. Zoon felt natural shyness and sadness was gnawing at her heart. Aziz raised the veil himself and saw the melancholic face and her eyes wet with tears.

Soon the bride and her friends were examining the wedding presents and when all was ready she was carried by her uncle into the palanquin. The ladies asked Abdi Rathar and

his wife to bid good-bye to the married couple. It was a most painful scene. All those assembled were griefstricken. They could not bear the separation. Now she was to go to another house and adjust there. She was to serve them and keep them pleased and in good humour, otherwise her life would be a bed of thorns. There were many poignant and sad thoughts assailing the bride's relatives, for the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law syndrome was well known in Kashmir since 1335 A.D. when Lal Ded, the great woman saint of Kashmir was born. Lal Ded was married early in life and was harshly treated by her mother-in-law. Her husband lived at Pampore and he could not reconcile himself easily to the religious leaning of his young wife. A rift, doubtless, hastened by the onslaughts of her mother-in-law's temperament, developed between the husband and his wife and the latter tolerated the ill-treatment of her mother-in-law with fortitude.

The women at Rathar's house were singing the songs of separation which brought flood of tears in the eyes of Abdi's relatives and also those of the bridegroom. The bride's close relatives came and embraced her turn by turn. All round there was weeping and sobbing. Abdi Rathar and his wife looked pathetic with tears in their eyes that even stones would have melted seeing them. The system of marriage was the way of the world and the will of God.

Zoon was received with great enthusiasm at her father-in-law's house. The palanquin was placed in the courtyard and as the bride stepped on the ground, her feet were washed with milk. The maternal uncle of the bridgeroom carried the bride on his shoulders inside the house and made her sit there on the shimmering red carpet. She took her seat with her gaze fixed on the ground. When her mother-in-law came she got up and was embraced by her. The bride showed to her the presents brought from her father for her. The women were all the time singing and playing on the *tumbaknaris*. The songs of Zoon, very popular in the village, were being sung to please her. One was:

The sparkle of your beauty dispels darkness
My Love, would you come to me but once!
O, the crimson tweed of my youthful form
Where were you dyed thus in passionate colour?
I could never fancy that unseen
Your heart will be eaten by moths.
My Love, would you come to me but once!

Shyly I slipped out of home
On pretext to fetch water;
I placed the pot . the stream
And myself ran at your casement.
"Wait not, come but once to me," I said.
"The northern wind may break my pail to pieces."
My Love, would you come to me but once!

Then Aziz Lone was asked to come inside and was asked to eat rice pudding at the hands of his bride and she at the hands of her husband. The girls and women laughed as Aziz bit his wife's fingers.

Some lasses and middle-aged dames had come out and divided themselves into two rows facing one another. The women in each row clasped the waist of another. Then the swing-like movement of the whole began, keeping time to the tune of a dance, known as "Rav".

The women were eager to see the face of the bride and they came one by one, paid some amount called *gulimuth* to the bride according to their status and the relation they bore to the bridegroom. They were all wonderstruck at the splendid beauty of the bride.

In the meantime, Aziz Lone was gossiping with his friends who gave him instructions about sex and married life. One friend told him that he must be very serious on the very first night so that she would be ever afraid of him. Another said, "Nay, you must be soft and loving to her so that she will love you all through her life." "You see Aziz the first impression is the last impression," said the third one." O friend, let him do

according to his own discretion and the mood of the occasion; nothing can be pre-planned. When sex comes, sense goes," remarked the fourth one. It was at midnight that he was able to go to his wife who was in a specially decorated room.

The guests stayed on for a few days more after the wedding. They simply had to do nothing but to eat and talk. Then one by one they left and everything returned to normal. Zoon remained for seven days in her husband's house after which she returned to her father's house. It was after a month when Aziz Lone was invited by his father-in-law to a feast at his house, where he received cash and presents. Zoon then went with him to her father-in-law's house and afterwards there was no bar to their coming or going. Thus Zoon was married to Aziz Lone; the year was c. 1564 A.D. when she was thirteen years old.

# 12

# *The Sorrow and Suffering*

Aziz Lone was dazzled by the splendid beauty of his wife; he was enchanted by her melodious voice. "Indeed, she was a marvellous gem," he thought and sat for hours with his wife doing nothing nor allowing his wife to do anything. Aziz appeared to have been hypnotized by his wife's beauty. His parents were horrified. After his father's reprimand he would loaf about with his loafer-friends. His mother tried to create hatred in the mind of Aziz for his wife. Habba was forbidden to sing or compose poems. But Zoon could not do so. Aziz's mother complained to him and in every way tried to malign her and poison Aziz's mind against her, so he took to drinking and then quarrelled with his wife. There was now no conjugal delight in the life of Zoon. But poetry was a paradise in her existence. She steeped herself in song so as to forget the rest of the world and sought refuge under the motherly wing of poetry.

One day Aziz Lone and his friends were sitting atop a krewa and gossiping when far away they spied Zoon coming in the company of her friends to collect some herbs in the fields.

"You have a marvellous wife, Aziz, such chiselled features, the bright big eyes and clear ivory complexion," said one

friend to Aziz. "How lucky you are but it is a combination of a brute and a beauty," said another and all the friends laughed at him.

Zoon and her friends were also talking while working.

"Zoon sister, just sing, we enjoy our labour and the work is done sooner when you sing."

"How can I sing when my heart is bleeding. Yesterday my mother-in-law created a scene and all the men in the neighbourhood came to witness it," said she.

"Your mother-in-law is a black bear. Really I tremble to see her," said Khatij, another companion.

"But do sing something," all of them requested her and she sang:

Oh Allah, forgive all my sins!
What gain to you, my Love, I die!

Having been ensnared how shall I fill my days?
I like a pretty basil have the colour of mentha
For a burning fire I carry in my heart.
What gain to you, my Love, if I die!
You have loaded yourself with valuable wares;
Bereft of everything the body will enter the grave,
My ambitious youth why not realise this reality;
What gain to you, my Love, if I die!

I read the thirty chapters (of the Holy Book) continuously
Without the least mistake;
But none could comprehend the message of love
In a single reading.
What gain to you, my Love, if I die!

Now Zoon and her companions came nearer to where Aziz and his friends were sitting.

"A-hah! What shall I tell you friend; see Zoon. She is really a bright moon and then she sings so melodiously that nightingales must be amazed," said Hussain.

'See, this fool, Aziz, he has got a hoorie from heaven as his wife," remarked Gaffara, another friend.

"Really fortune favours fools," said Jaffar and they all laughed again within the hearing of Zoon.

"Look at this fool, how he gets hot when we tell the truth. Yesterday his mother beat the poor woman," said Gaffara.

"It is said that Aziz was very fond of her but then his mother got jealous and tried to poison Aziz's mind against her but still he dotted on her. Outwardly Aziz's mother looks religious and was often found in prayers and would say that she passed the day fasting and the night in prayers. But look at her vicious doings. There is one Pandit Nila Kanth, who is a pastmaster in sorcery and the lore of enchantment. Aziz's mother went to the town and got some magic potion from the Pandit and in a subtle and clever way made him drink with milk and since then Aziz has become hostile towards Zoon. She, on her part, does all she can reasonably do to adjust herself to her hostile and unsympathetic mother-in-law. Zoon's gift of song and music has made her an enemy of her mother-in-law; she rebukes and taunts her. But she cannot repress the urge of song in her, even at the cost of her domestic peace. She gets the opportunity to sing whenever she goes to collect wild edible plants, dandelions and cress from the nearby river banks and fields and there she would burst into woodnotes wild, extempore and apt", continued Gaffara.

Aziz Lone's mother thought of a plan to harm Zoon. Kashmir was full of superstition, black magic and witchcraft, and fortune-tellers were plenty who were generally taken seriously. She went to a Muslim magician who used to give talismans, some things to eat. So off went Aziz Lone's mother to see this man for showing some way of creating hatred in the mind of Aziz against his beautiful wife.

The Muslim lived in a dirty mohalla in the town of Srinagar. There in the lanes dogs barked, men relieved in the

narrow alleys and garbage lay in small mounds. There was no genuine urbanity in the interior of Srinagar.

Aziz's mother entered the house of the man who was sitting on the floor cross-legged surrounded by both the Hindus and the Muslim gentry. His expression was benign and exuded happiness. When most of the people had left, Aziz's mother came nearer and told him how Aziz, her son, was tied to the apron strings of his wife and would not allow her to do any work but would remain with her all the time as if under her spell. He gave her some crystalline sugar and candy with incantations muttered over it, to be given to Aziz without his knowledge. She returned home and did as instructed by the Muslim. And then Aziz's mind and manners changed towards his wife. He started hating her and abusing her. But in these magical practices there was the danger that it might boomrang on the man with greater evil in case the victim was blameless and prayed to God with full faith.

One day as Zoon was carrying water upstairs, the pot broke. Her mother-in-law came down on hearing the sound. She rolled her eyes heavenwards and raised her arms to God. "May the flames of hell burn your body!" came the curse and bitter words from her. She seized Zoon by the hair and slapped her face ruthlessly all the time shrieking," You bitch, you broke the pot due to your carelessness. You are absent-minded, composing verses in your mind. The other day you broke the spindle of the spinning wheel," cried Aziz's mother.

Outside the clouds poured a drenching rain mixed with hail. The tempest seathed like a cauldron. The boiling tempest, however, ranged in Zoon's bosom. She could endure the humiliations, the abuses, the word-lashings and the beatings no longer. "Go and get either the price of the spindle. You have broken a pot also. Go and get a new pot bought from the market, otherwise you will get no food. "The words of her mother-in-law resounded in her ears. A flash of lightning rent the clouds and was followed by a reverberating thunder.

Suddenly she threw a scarf over her head and dashed out of the house and turned towards the house of Kesho Pandit. Her heart told her that the Pandit could find some solution to her predicament. Her lips muttered the name of Allah and the Holy prophet and her inner fury was at its height. She reached the house and entering sank down on the floor of the living room and burst into wailing. Everyone came to lift her but she heard nothing, she contined to wail, wail bitterly. Then a wild cry issued from her throat, as wild as a thunder.

"Baba, I can't live there with my husband, they torture me, they beat me mercilessly." After some time she calmed.

"Don't worry. When the storm subsides we shall go to Sheikh Masud, the respected darvesh, and apprise him of the matter and he will tell us what to do," said the Pandit.

"What can he do except tell me to tolerate and be patient; God will help me. God is sleeping. You say God is merciful and what mercy has He shown to me?" continued Zoon.

"God is great and it is our sins that bring our suffering. Hear my story. You see, I am blind in one eye. I was living at the bottom of Shankaracharya hill and had a flourishing business and I felt grateful to God. I used to carry a big pot full of water up the hill to Shiva's temple and pour the water out of the pot, on the image. One of the spikes of the trident on the head of the image struck into my eye and pierced it. I thought I was dead, so much blood came out. I cried for help and the *pujari* of the temple came and took me into his hut, washed my eye and applied some ointment and bandaged it and after some time carried me to my house. I thought my life, my business and my world had finished for me and I had no courage to live as I was so frustrated. But then Lal Ded, our mystic saint came to me in a dream:

"Oh Pandit, I could not help you in spite of your devotion to me. You had to undergo the sufferings it was fated; none can change it nor even the gods. Only God is merciful. Get up

and begin life again. I heard her voice as I hear you," said the Pandit. He continued to say," I awoke, I shivered and narrated this dream to none but to my wife who has been with me in the sun and the storm. I got up and after bathing, I again took the pot and went up the hill chanting the name of God. I then came to Chandhara and again thrived both mentally and economically. I have land and orchards and my business. I am contented and happy."

Now the thunder, the lightning and shrieking of the wind had stopped. There was no rain and the day became bright and Kesho Pandit accompanied by Zoon left for Abdi Rathar's house. They had shut themselves up in their house, fastened the windows and the doors. Abdi Rathar was reciting the Holy Quran and his voice was deeper and tearful. As soon as he saw the trembling daughter with drenched clothes his entire being quivered and with a hoarse toneless voice gasped:

"My darling daughter! Zoon, my daughter! What is the matter?"

Kesho Pandit related to him the whole story of suffering of Zoon and told him to seek the advice of Sheikh Masud, the great Sufi. Then Kesho Pandit left.

Next day, the day had scarcely dawned. The atmosphere was calm and farmers were busy in their fields as they could accomplish much before the sun got up. Zoon was busy with her embroidery.

"Do you see, Zoon, there is Khawaja Masud," said Rathar, her father. Zoon looked out of the window and saw an old and graceful man going on the village path followed by his disciples.

"Who is he Baba?"

"He is a great Sufi with spiritual powers. He cures diseases and brings comfort to the miserable."

"Where does he go so early?"

"He must be going to cure some sick person."

"And where does he live?"

He lives in a small cottage adjacent to the mosque."

Next day when it was not yet dawn, Zoon and her father Abdi Rathar were plodding their way towards the village mosque where the saintly Khawaja Masud was expected to be praying yet. They wanted to see him in his room before others arrived. They waited outside in the small garden when the Sheikh opened the door of his cottage. The father and the daughter got up and bowed to him and stepped inside the Sheikh's room as he beckoned them to follow. The Sheikh sat on the ground supported by a bolster:

"Aslam-Alai-kum", said the two in unison.

"Allah bless you. Come and sit down."

They both came nearer and sat down.

The Sheikh said," Come child, unburden your heart."

"Jinab," said Abdi Rathar, "My daughter has been subjected to a harsh treatment by her mother-in-law and her son, my daughter's husband. They ill-treat her and her husband, the other day, even trampled upon her," said Rathar in mournful words.

"What is the reason of their ill-treating you; it makes two to quarrel."

"Jinab, they accuse her of neglecting her work and instead wasting her time in reading and writing."

"Does she not work?"

"Jinab, she works from dawn to dusk."

"Oh yes, this happened to our Lal Ded also, who lived in Pampore; her mother-in-law inflicted all the troubles on her. Oh yes when there are dark clouds on the sky and showers of

rain are falling it seems that the sun will never appear. But then all of a sudden the clouds disappear, the rain stops and the sun appears ever so resplendent. I see Zoon's trouble will soon be over. She will be a queen and will be remembered for her songs and melodious verses till the moon and the sun shine. Zoon, you will marry someone soon. I change your name and call you Habba Khatun (The Lady of Love), by which name you will become immortal."

"No, no, I shall not marry any mortal and be made ill and wretched by him too," said Zoon in confusion.

"Habba Khatun, you are but a child and you talk like one who knows nothing of life. Are all men wretched like your husband? Does everybody give way to every whim and gust of passion? Have you not seen how your parents have lived in mutual peace and harmony? Child, God will bless you, don't be disheartened. Love, even mundane, raises a man to the position of an angel. Take these almonds and be kind and good to the poor. Always remember love is a great force."

"Now I shall call your mother-in-law and your husband and make them take you to their house and treat you kindly."

Zoon shuddered and tears rolled down her cheeks and she again said," I shall never be fond of any man," said Zoon.

"You do not know what you are saying. Destiny will not consult you. Time will give its decision and make you obey the Destiny's dictates."

Her husband and her mother-in-law were sent for by the Khawaja and they accused Zoon of her many defects and shortcomings. "Does it behove a peasant woman to compose poetry and sing when she should be helping us in the home and in the fields."

"God is love and mercy but you must fear His wrath. Let her sing and write verses. Take her home and be kind to her, all will be well," said the Sheikh in a commanding tone. Habba

Khatun, Zoon will be so called now, will go to your house after resting at her father's house for a few days," he ordered them solemnly. "Go Habba, my child, the call of destiny will come to you soon," continued Sheikh Masud and the assembly was dissolved and everyone left the room. Habba and Abdi came back to their house.

Now Habba Khatun remained standing by the window gazing far out over the fields while all the stars in heaven appeared flitting before her eyes. "Who could come and love her and marry her?" she mused and some inner voice said, "Our eyes are but short-sighted to see the ways of Allah and Allah is great and pitiful."

But as a true Muslim it was her duty to love her husband and be loyal to him and keep him pleased, she thought.

But not even with a microscope could one observe a grain of mutual love between Habba and Aziz. Their relationship had reached the stage of final rupture. Habba's frigid heart could no longer, in spite of her resolve, allow Aziz his conjugal right. Her nerves were tingling with excitement and anxiety.

# 13

# *Love's Awakening*

After a few days Habba Khatun returned to her husband's house laden with gifts for Aziz's mother. But both of them harassed her all the more and she could find relief in song and music alone. In dismay she sang all alone:

I am unhappy in my husband's house;
Relieve me from suffering, my father's clan.

I went to fetch water from the stream
The earthen pot broke, my noble parents.
Pay for it, I entreat you;
Or else get a new one to replace it.

I am unhappy in my husband's house;
Relieve me from suffering, my father's clan.

My young life is fast fading;
Going up the uplands breaks my back;
I get blisters collecting herbs;
My wounds give me intense pain,
As if salt is sprinkled on them.

I am unhappy in my husband's house;
Relieve me from suffering, my father's clan!

Exhausted I fell asleep on the spinning wheel
Thus I broke the shaft;

My mother-in-law caught me by the tresses
That was worse than death for me.

I am smarting under the cruelty of my Love;
I am brimful with sorrow.
Habba Khatun has thus imparted the hint;
Be warned and watchful, my father's clan.

She pondered over her plight for many days and came to the conclusion that she must try to win her husband and love him. Therefore, notwithstanding her genuine grief, she renewed her offer of making greater sacrifices for him and even to surrender her precious jewellery to him.

"While the world is asleep," she said, "sleeplessness is gnawing at my heart. I, therefore, fetch water and hope to receive your acceptance." But response there was none. The appeal was lost in the void. Thus in a wretched manner Habba Khatun continued to slave and earn her bread and shelter at her husband's home. She got food by hard physical labour, working on the family farm growing cotton. Habba Khatun never ceased to testify her unabated attachment to her husband by all the usual manifestation. Aziz Lone and the family had robbed her of soul. She felt that she was dogged by some fatality which forbade the possibility of her getting a good treatment from her husband and his mother; against Fate there was nothing to be done. Even in the most desperate situations she had always an inexhaustible capacity for hope. How utterly worn out she felt in soul and body!

Far ahead of Chandhara was a hillock covered with high trees and nearby a large pool of clear blue water. There, at many other beauty spots, were some hunting lodges. The king had built these buildings in those parts for the convenience which they could afford to the nobles or to be used in their excursions. Yusuf Shah had also prepared a delightful lodge at some distance from Chandhara, where he would come sometimes in autumn for shooting ducks and wild fowl, which were found in abundance there.

Habba Khatun now passed her days and nights brooding and sometimes singing her melancholic songs like a lonely sparrow. The only thing that could break the monotony of her existence was composing verses and singing them when she went to collect cow dung, cress, dandelions and edibles with other village belles. She did not work on her verses but exhaled them as a flower exudes fragrance. Rhythm came as naturally to her as breathing. She seemed to weave rhymes and rhythms with an instinctive ease. Her images grew out of the common soil as the grass and the rushes.

Once the sky was clear blue and the moon poured magic silver down on the purple fields of saffron as on Paradise. The atmosphere was so pleasant, so saturated with the subtle odours of the flowers that the air was wine and Habba Khatun, who happened to loiter all alone among the fields was intoxicated. Indeed, it was a romantic evening; she reached a place and bent down to dig out dandelions.

Lo and behold! the prince Yusuf Shah was also returning from hunting and had left his companions far behind. The fields all around, he felt, had the sheen of jewels and attracted his eyes like the looks of a dreamy damsel. He stopped and tied the horse to a poplar tree. Then a sweet song was wafted to him by the breeze:

My Pomegranate Blossom!
My Love, my hands for you bracelets cull;
Come, enjoy my full bloom!
I am the earth, you the heaven blue,
The protector who lends an angel grace.
In me many a delight and delicacies embrace;
You are my fair and lovely guest.
Come, enjoy my full bloom!

When the sun set in the west, Laila lit the lamp;
Ashamed it became numb and senseless.
You are the lamp and I the moth;
Come, enjoy my full bloom!

My youthful summer is running out
And the roses are fast withering;
O my nightingale, this hour sing to the roses of youth.
Come, darling, enjoy my full bloom!

I fully wail and lament
You need not, nor cheer my spirits low;
Do I seem lacking in charm and loveliness?
Come, darling, enjoy my full bloom!

Yusuf walked slowly towards the voice till he spied the singer. Habba Khatun's supple slender *silk* made her look a heavenly being. When the light of the moon fell upon her soft hair, it flickered. She too saw him and on her downcast face the colour came and went in swift and soft flashes. She stopped singing. The young prince spoke not a word and looked with a half questioning glance at her. There was a strange pleading in her eyes. Then he recovered and spoke to her in verse; he was a poet of great talent. Yusuf said:

"The Beauty has come out in great attire
I fear the storm rushings of the rain."

A softness came about Habba Khatun's black eyes and hovered over her face now uplifted to him. She smiled and replied:

"Take heart, O youth, banish all fear and fright,
For soon the sun will rend the cloak of night."

The prince felt delighted and joyfully went on to say:

"Uphill and downdale I wandered
In quest of the darling of my heart
When lo! sweet and fair before me
I find the precious pearl."

The prince then proudly said:

When the diver dives in the deep
Come up he must with lustrous pearl."

In all loveliness Habba gazed at him and softly spoke:

"Nay, hard he has to toil deep down in the main
Then and then alone some gift he may gain!"

Yusuf said:

"How do you know, my sweet, I am a prince?
How do you judge I am the heir apparent?"

Habba replied:

"You ride a royal chaperoned horse
Your demeanour is kingly and kind.
And you are but confused and in conflict."

Yusuf said :

"Your place is in a prince's palace."

Habba replied :

"How can I go away from him whom wedded am I?"

The poetical conversation continued for some time and Yusuf decided instantly that the enchanting woman was one which must grace his palace. He was fired with the desire to marry her. Then Yusuf became serious and sentimental. "Ah! you are the nightingale of Paradise." She looked down. "I hope you will forgive me if I am doing presumptious thing in speaking to you in so direct a manner. But if you give thought to my words, I shall be well-contented," said Yusuf. The unbroken stillness, the balmy air, the beauty of the scenery, all combined to make her stand contentedly, which after the day's ceaseless activity was most soothing and restoring. She forgot her home, her husband and everything. Like a hypnotized person in a sort of drowsiness Yusuf murmured to himself:

"This marvellous gem should adorn the palace of Kashmir's prince." Then as if he awoke from a dream he said to Habba Khatun:

"I see, sweet lady, you are born under a lucky star. You will be the love of a king, come with me, my sweetheart." Then Habba rewarded Yusuf with a smiling glance and said, "Great prince, who can be so foolish or callous as to refuse your love! You must not idolise me. I am a woman no better than any other." The music of her words chimed upon her lips. In her met all the charms that God had bestowed upon a woman to rule the heart of a man.

Yusuf rejoiced at Habba's words, taking great draught of air into his breast, thinking his object was already won. "But no," continued Habba," better to die than deal in treachery. I cannot be your concubine or a courtesan; I shall take poison before I become one or the other. Do you think that the door of exit from matrimonial alliance is as wide as the door of entrance? My lord, you must know that we both, my husband and I, are well and truly married by a proper contract, confirmed by the Sunna. I am bound by the proper contract. Respected Lord, I can go no further. Her I lie down and measure my grave."

Yusuf Shah replied, "I shall get the proper divorce for you from your husband and properly marry you according to the Islamic custom and law."

Habba did not answer and Yusuf thought that her silence was the consent and he felt that he had been transported into some realm of magic, for all about him was beauty, passing the compass of poetry.

The sound of the horse's hoofs was heard and it came nearer and nearer. She turned to go and her *pheran* which she was wearing fluttered in the breeze like leaves in autumn.

It was late, very late, when Habba Khatun reached home, situated in the glade of Chandhara, like a somnambulist. She

did not feel afraid. Nobody was in the house, only her husband was wide awake and furious.

"Where have you been so late?" he roared.

Habba Khatun kept quiet, cudgling her brain to find some answer. He repeated the question:

"Where have you been?'

At last she said, "To Pampore."

"What for?"

She answered," I was just sitting there looking at the lovely saffron flowers in the silver rays of the moon."

"With whom?" Aziz retorted. "With none." she replied. "I am not going to be satisfied with your false answer, let me tell you, "he said and Habba did not reply but lay huddled up in the corner of the room.

He trembled with fury, so exasperated that he scarcely knew what he was saying and shaking her with all his strength and he repeated, "With whom were you? Do you hear me?"

She wrenched herself out of his grasp with a sudden movement and Aziz Lone lost his temper, feeling that he had been tricked and angrily pounced on her. He now held her under him, boxing her ears in the most violent manner, exclaimed:

"Take that, take that—and that. There you are. You trollop, you strumpet, you strumpet!"

When he was out of breath, exhausted from beating her, he got up and went to the kitchen to get himself a tumbler of water, for he was about to faint after his exhaustion.

And Habba lay huddled up in the corner and heaving great sobs, feeling that that was the end of her life that day and that it was all her own fault.

Then in the midst of her tears she faltered, "Listen Aziz, it is my fault to have gone to Pampore and there to have stayed so long. Excuse me. I shall never do so again. I shall not leave my house in future."

He did not say anything but feeling at his heart's core as a husband an inexhaustible hatred against the woman who goes about singing and loitering.

Every bone of Habba Khatun was aching and she had not the strength even to recite the Holy Book, which alone in the midst of agonising moments brought her comfort and hope. She felt extremely low-spirited and sad. She sat at her low window but she heard nothing but the beautiful warbling of a bird in a tree, somewhere in the distance. No doubt the bird was singing in a low voice during the night to lull his mate, who was sleeping on her eggs.

And she thought of and herself pictured him sleeping by her side whispering sweet love. Then she felt a real love awakened in her heart which overwhelmed her whole being. "That which is written must be fulfilled; one may change the earth and the sky but one cannot alter one's destiny," slowly murmured Habba Khatun.

## 14

# "Come, Be My Queen"

Habba Khatoon got up late in the morning. Her eyes were swollen with crying and she got down the stairs slowly and went into the living room on the ground floor. Her mother-in-law had come and her husband was also there.

His eyes were bloodshot and he looked as if he had not slept, for his face was haggard. "Well", her husband said slowly the moment she entered," so you were enjoying the saffron flowers at Pampore." Habba Khatoon was wary, for there was sarcasm in his voice. She could not guess if he knew that she had been with prince Yusuf and she said falteringly, "yes, that is it."

"Don't trouble yourself to lie to me. I know who you have been with." He spoke between his teeth, lifting off each word with a savage snap and he was murderouly angry. "I was a fool to believe you. You ungrateful jilting little slut—I've been waiting for you while you were making love with that fellow. You are selfish, mercenary, whoring bitch. I should kill you. I would kill you, yes, I'd like to watch the breath go out of you." It appeared to Habba Khatoon that he did not know that it was the prince, for in that case he would not have used the filthy language and would have been afraid.

His voice went on in a low monotonous tone that did not sound like him and his face was twisted with rage and sickness and jealousy into something she could scarcely recoginse. "This man is malevolent and savage," Habba thought.

She stared at him in terror and took a step or two backward intending to turn and run if he made the slightest move. Slowly he started towards her. And like a frightened animal she whirled but he was quicker; before she knew what was happening he had grabbed her arm and jerked her back again. She screamed but he clasped one hand over her mouth and gave her head a vicious shake.

"Shut up, you lousy little coward! I am not going to hurt you." He was straining every nerve and muscle, exhausted by jealousy and sleeplessness, to hold his fury in leash. Habba Khatoon's eyes looked up at him, big and glittering with fear, but the grasp he had on her was so tight that she could not have moved if she had tried. "I want you to live, I want you to live long." Suddenly he let her go.

"I will never give you divorce, so that you are free to go on whoring. You will be my prisoner here and I'll whip you daily as a wanton bitch." He picked up his cap and put it on and then said," I will know what else you have been doing with that fellow up in the fields." And he left the house.

Now was the turn of his mother, who spat at her face. She called her the prostitute of Tashwan. "May God curse you and condemn you to hell on the day of Judgement!" Then she grinned maliciously.

Her mother-in-law gave her a sweeping glance of a lazy wench. "Aziz has gone to enquire about the man who had a lick at you during the first quarter of the night the other day."

Suddenly Habba Khatoon reached out, grabbed her mother-in-law by the hair and gave a violent jerk. It was a mighty shock to her as she released herself with difficulty

from Habba's grip. She stood up like a statue, not a nerve of her moved. Then Habba Khatoon climbed up the stairs slowly to her room. She knew that she had brought upon herself the life of torment and that no one had pity for the powerless and her restoration in the eyes of Aziz was impossible. Her behaviour at this juncture was a grievous offence. For a long moment she stood at the window lost and forlorn and then she sat down sobbing till exhaustion brought her sleep.

When she awoke it was already dark. Habba Khatoon had never known Aziz and his mother so blindly furious and it terrified her. Now Aziz might come and thrash her savagely till death should release her. All of a sudden she got up, slipped out of the house. She didn't go to her father's house but ran on and on to Pampore and there along the road till she reached the bank of the river Jhelum and contemplated to throw herself into it and end her life.

When Yusuf reached home he felt a strange exultation blended with some sort of restlessness. He went to his mother, who was a wonderful woman though sixty years old. She was quite sharp and alert. She also had the habit of reading and thinking and was a woman of great charm with no maladies of old age. She had been a lovely and invaluable mother to the prince, who would never displease her.

"Mother, I must marry that girl, rather the woman of Chandhara. I can't live without her. She may be poor in origin. What of that? But once you see her, you will be enchanted. She is angelic in features and sings like a nightingale. Mother, she is also an exellent poetess."

"My heart warms when I look at you," said his mother. "You are the chief joy of my life. May you be so always! One day you will wear the crown and Habba Khatoon must be able enough to sit by your side as your help-mate. Many men have their malicious eyes on the green pastures of Kashmir, you know." His mother was known for her wisdom.

"Well, Yusuf let me see her first and then we shall decide of her being brought into the palace," said her mother.

Now the great queen could not go to see her at her modest house nor could Habba be brought to the palace directly without rhyme or reason. "Yes, Yusuf could hold a *mushaira* and invite a few great poets and scholars there. She also could come and recite her verses. The queen would be present there, could see her and talk to her quite freely without hitch and hinderance," he thought. He was, of course, sure that his mother would like Habba. Yusuf felt happy at the thought. But it would take some time for the execution of the plan. In the meantime, he again rode to Pampore where he had met Habba Khatoon. He was loitering there on the horseback, when he saw far off a woman running excitedly. Curiosity and some faint recognition made him spur his horse and run after the figure.

Habba Khatoon came on the bank of the river Jhelum and could not muster up courage to leap into it. "Who says that to commit suicide is a cowardly act? It require tremendous courage and determination. No, no I don't want this watery grave." She said to herself and shuddered at the thought that her beautiful body would be eaten by the fish in the river and these fish would eaten by the men of Chandhara and, may be, by Aziz and his mother also, who would relish them. "No, I shall not give my body to feast at. But then what shall I do? Where shall I go? I can't go to my husband's house? I can't go to my father's house. And then I have to beg at the roadside. The gallants will whistle and give catcalls." She felt extremely disgusted and dejected and sat down to brood and then wail.

Then again she began to reflect. She could not return to her husband's house nor to her father's house. This was the first clear thought in her brain. Should she beg on the roadside? It hurt her that she was all alone and helpless. So with a jerk she got up to leap in the running water when Yusuf reached there and caught her by the shoulder and pulled her

back. She did not look behind. Then Yusuf took her in his arms and got her away from the river. It was quite dark and she couldn't see his face. He, for the first time, kissed her and she struggled to free herself from him but it was all in vain.

"Now darling, be calm. You will live with me in the palace as my favourite queen."

"No, how can I?"

Then he released her and made her sit by his side.

"Yes, I have convinced my mother. Only she will have to see you and I am sure she will be affectionate towards you. Now smile."

"But I am not free", and related to him the whole story of her husband's treatment towards her.

"Don't worry. After my mother's consent I shall arrange your divorce from your husband. There can be no compatibility between the beauty and the brute," said Yusuf.

The memory of the day and of the previous night came to her mind and she wept and sobbed.

"Cry if you feel like it; this will relieve you and you will feel better." Then he got up to bring the horse which was grazing nearby and lifted her up on the saddle. He also got up behind her and they rode on.

"Where will you take me?"

"To your father's hourse, where else?"

"How can I face my parents there?"

"There is no alternative. You stay there for some time. I shall soon arranage to take you to the palace as my wedded wife according to the strict Islamic laws and tradition. It will take some time to arrange it all. Then he drew her towards him and again kissed her passionately. She did not object. She felt blood again returning to her body; she had the most

pleasant sensation. She now believed in the prince more than she believed in anyone, even her parents. She was amazed at the cataclysmic change in her thought and spirit.

"Your parents made a mistake. You were never meant for a yokel. They have been deceived."

Then they got down at Pampore. Although it was dark but they could by instinct see each other and notice even the gestures of each other. Then she told him the prophesy of Kesho Pandit at her birth and later of Sheikh Masud's prediction.

"Yes, it was preposterous to have married such an enchanting a girl as you in so poor, dreary and undistinguished class. Youth comes once and you have wasted much time," said Yusuf.

"Yes, it is said that 'no hand can gather up the withered fallen petals of the Rose of Youth." But what could I do; I was helpless."

"Well, I do not know. But I know this much that it was absurd and wasteful for a girl so beautiful like you to have lived a life of self-denial while your superb beauty and emotional make-up cried for the joy of life."

"Then you made a great mistake in not having met me earlier and confessed your love for me," replied Habba playfully and they both laughted together.

"But you have not given a direct answer to my straight question," asked Yusuf Shah.

"To what?"

"Will you like to marry me?"

She was silent and he grew anxious." Answer Habba, answer," asked Yusuf.

"What does a woman's silence indicate?"

"Consent, O, then I have your consent." He embraced and kissed her with complete abandon. She felt a unique ecstasy.

"But one thing," he said, "Don't you know that I am too old for you.'

"How do I know your age? And then a man never grows old."

"O yes, they say that in Kashmir girls and apples ripe quickly and fall quickly but men like stallions are always strong if they get nourishing food. Well, I am thirty."

"And I am nineteen."

Yusuf became serious and said," Listen Habba, I take you into confidence. I am young, yet life is crushing me heavily. There is not a nobleman in the land who is not against me; even my person is not safe. There is no guarantee that my orders, when I become a king, will be carried out or that the existing laws will be obeyed. I would like to put everything in order to bring peace and prosperity to my people. I might achieve this if my nobles alone were the only impediments. But the Mughal king Akbar wants to grab Kashmir. Then I have my private sorrows. My wives are absolute dunces. I have been married to them for political and financial considerations and not for their personal merit or qualities of sound common-sense and feminine charm. Love and peace are the corner stone of my being. I don't want men to be butchered and our cash and kind wrung from us to fill the bottomless greed of the nobles and the soldiery. I am not a coward. All these things alarm me. Warfare I hate as thousands become widows and orphans. Darling, I hope to receive from you strength, counsel and love," said Yusuf.

The cloud which hid the face of the moon had drifted away flooding the land with silvery light. Before she entered her father's house she raised herself on toes to see Yusuf's face distinctly. Yusuf was tall, more than six feet with a look of

robust health. His physique was magnificent and never shown to better advantage than on horseback. His skin was swarthy, his eyes brown and he had an abundance of black hair that fell heavily to his shoulder and when he smiled his teeth gleamed white beneath a narrow moustache. His features were harsh and strongly marked, scared by disillusion and cynicism and in spite of that he had a glowing charm.

"Habba, do you hear that nightingale singing among the trees? Listen," said Yusuf.

"O yes, how melodious it sings! You also sing like it. It is a bird of Paradise; the vehemence of emotion, stirred by the song, stirs my love within me. It claims mastery over me, as does your song."

"I also feel a strange anguish!"

"Habba, don't think I am made of steel without feelings. I must make you my dearest bride, for I am neither heartless nor soulless."

"Yes, jinab, I feel it is my spirit speaking to your spirit, both sitting at the feet of Allah!"

"Well, my strong determination shall decide my destiny", added Habba Khatoon. The nightingale's song was the only voice heard and it made tears well up in Habba's eyes.

"We are both over-excited and let us now go ahead," said Yusuf.

Then Yusuf lifted her on to the horseback and they rode to Chandhara. They didn't mind if anybody saw them together at such a late hour. They felt a sense of bliss falling upon their souls. They were unmindful of everything, for their thoughts were only of love and marriage. Before Allah, who is omnipresent, they were husband and wife.

On his way back to the palace, Yusuf Shah conjured a picture of his old queens now over-ripe and tired and flabby,

who were now things of the past and to him looked like useless fossils. "Yes, his elder queen was past her prime, "he muttered. There was no charm in their talk and manners; in fact these women never had. He felt repugnance towards them. Then the vision of Habba Khatoon's freshness and fine features, melodious voice was all enthralling. He must get Habba in the palace, yes, he must, Yusuf said aloud with determination. Late in the night when he was in his bed he felt uneasiness possessing him and with all his effort he could not sleep for a long time.

As to Habba Khatoon, the events of the day had the amazement of a fairy tale. This was a strange first love of her life and she felt drunk and distracted as if she had been quaffing a heady wine when she recollected the day's event. She pondered over it and decided to break the circle of foes who encircled her. How the injured woman's heart had become strong, strong heart hardened beneath the hammer of destiny. She felt assured that the dark clouds which had hovered over her destiny seemed to have been happily dispelled and this gave her a great moral strength.

# 15

# *The Divorce*

It was late in the night; everyone in the village of Chandhara was in the lap of sweet sleep.

Aziz Lone had the last puff of the hubble bubble. Then, he rose, stretched himself and made up his mind to go to bed. He had been thinking of Habba Khatoon, his wife, and wished her to be dead so that he might be relieved of the miserable situation. But it made him all the more grieved to think that at that time she might be happily singing at her father's house. Aziz Lone's father had gone to see *Hafiz Nagma* at Pampore but Aziz had resisted all his persuasions. There, he feared, the men might question him about the conduct of Habba and he didn't want to hear her name being spoken. Her very name was a poison to his ears.

He was just about to undress when he was startled by a sharp loud knock at his door. The knock was repeated more peremptorily.

"Who is there?" called out Aziz. "I am asleep."

"Open the door, please; I request you," answered a voice he did not recognise. "I am here on an affair of importance."

The tone sounded serious; the voice was unknown. Aziz opened the door. He found himself face to face with a man of

distinction about thirty, tall and dark with singularly piercing eyes. He was attired in rich clothes and showed that he belonged to aristocracy. He was a total stranger to Aziz, who could only imagine that he had come there by mistake, unable to account for his presence in such humble quarters. The illusion was dispelled by the stranger's first words.

"Are you Aziz Lone?"

"Yes sir," answered Aziz, still more astonished.

"You are *mohtarima* Habba Khatoon's husband?" pursued the stranger.

"Yes, I am that unfortunate one," answered Aziz piteously. "Please give yourself the trouble to come in" as the stranger had remained standing in the doorway. He complied but declined the offer to sit down.

"My business is urgent. I have no time to lose. I have come to offer you some money for your little inconvenience. You have to accompany me to a place just now and speak about your relations with *mohtarima* Habba Khatoon before some witnesses on the condition that you will maintain perfect secrecy afterwards. For this trouble I am empowered to offer you this small bag containing five thousand dirhams. Do you accept?"

"Will the gentleman sit here?" asked Aziz.

A curious expression crossed the stranger's face.

"No, my two horses are below with a groom and we will ride together to the place where you are required. There is one more condition that should be mentioned — you must submit to be blindfolded during the ride."

His lure of money and a certain amount of curiosity to see the end of the mystery prompted him to say 'yes'.

"Jinab, I accept," he said at length.

Aziz put on his skull-cap and his shoes.

"I am ready," said he, holding the door for the stranger to pass out. At the entrance of the house two horses with a groom were waiting. "Allow me," the stranger said as Aziz was about to ride and produced a large black handerkerchief. Then he proceeded to blindfold Aziz as he had stipulated.

The horses ran at a trot along the roads. Aziz's companion made no attempt at conversation and his own brain was so busily at work attempting to fathom the mystery of the adventure in which he was engaged that he was glad of silence. Presently from the greater freshness of the air and the sweet scent of the almond and thorny trees which rose into Aziz's nostrils he surmised that they might be passing at the bottom of the Hari Parbat hill. Still they went on and the silence was unbroken. The air changed again it was no longer loaded with the scent of the spring flowers and the dampness of vegetation; they had emerged from the orchards and in a few minutes the horses were halted. Aziz was assisted to dismount the horse and went up some steps across what he took to be an entrance-hall and then he became aware of a sudden glare of light. The bandages were removed from his eyes and he stood blinking and dazed unable for a few minutes to realise the scene before him. What he saw was a brilliantly lighted room, the green damask of the walls heightening the effect of the many oil lamps. It was a room of luxurious elegance crowded with objects of beauty and devices for comfort. He was standing by a couch on which lay a young man in princely costume. Aziz was attracted by the calm dark beauty of his face. Then seated some distance away on a dais were three men, one of them was, obviously, a Moulvi and another a gentleman of quality who appeared to be a Qazi. Aziz sat on the floor near them.

"Aziz Lone," said the man who appeared to be a Qazi, "Do you love Habba Khatoon or not?"

"Not at all, sir; I rather hate her from the core of my heart," replied Aziz.

"Why?"

"Sir, she does not do any household work but loiters about with her companions singing and playing. Besides, I doubt her character. Only a few days back she was seen making love to a man among the saffron fields of Pampore."

"Will you take her home, now that she has left your house?"

"Sir, how can I take such a wanton, wayward woman home when she has gone out of control."

"Then what do you propose to do with her?"

"To leave her at her father's house and let her do what she likes," replied Aziz.

"Do you swear by the Almighty that you do not want to live with her and that you hate her?"

"Yes, sir, I swear solemnly that I do not want her."

"You will have nothing to do with her henceforth and you want to divorce her?" asked the Moulvi.

"Nothing, O absolutely. Talaq, talaq, talaq, I say three times as enjoined by law."

"You say with your full senses alert and after careful thought?"

"Of course, sir."

Then they handed over to him a piece of paper which was the declaration of his divorce and he was asked to put his thumb impression on it, as he was illiterate.

All the other men present put their signatures on the paper. They made two or three copies of it. They read out what was the statement of divorce to Aziz who put the thumb impression on the papers.

"Are you now satisfied with the whole procedure?"

"Yes, sir, thank you!"

Then for some time he seemed unable to speak; copy of the paper which had been given to him trembled in his grasp.

Then the stranger went to another door and left the room returning after a few minutes with a lady who was tall, fair and remarkably beautiful. The flowing *pheran* and the silk shawl that she had hastily thrown round her head indicated the perfect proportion and excellent beauty of form; her lustrous eyes showed some anxiety.

"All the men stood up and made a low bow to her in respect as she entered. Aziz, on seeing them doing so, likewise performed the same respectful bow.

"Great queen," said the Qazi pointing towards Aziz," He is the husband of *mohtarima* Habba Khatoon and he gladly and out of his will and without persuasion or coersion divorced her. He has no regrets, kind and benevolent queen, but feels relieved."

"What the magistrate says, is that true? Speak man and don't think that you are forced to do so," said the graceful lady to Aziz.

"Your Majesty, what the magistrate has said is perfectly true, "replied Aziz in all humility.

"Our business is finished," said the messanger to Aziz. "I only thank you and reconduct you home. Shall we go?"

"I am at your orders, sir," said Aziz.

The bandage was replaced on his eyes and he was again led across the hall, down the steps and lifted on the horseback.

Having arrived at Aziz Lone's house the messanger paused before removing the bandage.

"Remember, the condition was for absolute silence, at least for some time; I can rely on you."

"Yes, sir," said Aziz Lone firmly.

The bandage was withdrawn. Aziz got down from the horse and stood at his door in the grey dawn, watching the two beautiful horses as they were driven away along the deserted road. "It was a turn of the wheel of fortune," he thought.

When he entered the room, he thrust the small bag of money into the hands of his mother and related the story how he had been driven blindfolded and he had divorced his wife. They all felt happy. Their days of affliction, they thought, were over. Yet Aziz Lone, howsoever stupid he was, felt that some magical thread that bound his hand had been snapped and he felt miserable and wanted to enter that strange enchanted garden of memory to see things as they might have been before his mother had quarrels with Habba Khatoon. It was not right, however, that he should give another thought to the far away rememberance, of a vanished springtime. It was gone for ever and the memory now brought heartache and tears. A terrible hatred for his mother welled up in his heart which he found hard to put down. He fell ill with a fever which would not go down in spite of Kesho Pandit's herbs and words of consolation.

At Abdi Rathar's house early in the morning there was a knock at the door and Habba Khatoon got up with an unwonted hesitancy in her manner to open the door. There was a messenger from the palace.

"I hope I see the esteemed lady, Habba Khatoon in person," said the courier.

"Yes, please; I am the person."

"I pay my homage, great lady and have the good fortune to hand over this paper and a gift for you from His Highness, the prince Yusuf Shah Chak."

A mist came before her eyes when she read the divorce decree and then it was immediately dispelled when she examined the pair of gold bangles studded with pearls and diamonds.

She asked the courier to come up for a cup of tea. "Excuse me, esteemed lady, I have to report back immediately to the great prince whether you are pleased with the separation deed and the gift. What should I tell him, madam? He is eagerly waiting."

"Pay my respects to the prince. Thank him on my behalf for all this trouble". She sighed and said that there had been days of infinite sadness for her. She scribbled a few lines on a piece of paper which she had held against the door. Those were:

> I dyed my hands in henna
> When will he come?
> It's Love should come to me, bedecked.
> Come, still my craving,
> I am dying for thee;
> Without thee how shall I fill my days?
> I cannot endure separation from thee.

She folded the paper, wrapped it in another piece of paper and closed it with some paste. The courier took the envelope. He was enchanted as he had never seen such a radiant beauty. He bowed low to her and departed.

When she got upstairs she received a triumphal reception from her parents. Her cousin had been eavesdropping. Then came their aunt and she too heard it and she went from house to house of Chandhara spreading the news of divorce and of the gift from the prince to Habba Khatoon.

Yusuf wanted to keep it a secret till his mother had seen Habba Khatoon and approved his marriage with her. But here it was that the people had already come to know and it was now an open secret.

When the messenger returned and reported his meeting with Habba Khatoon and handed over the note containing the verse Yusuf felt that a special Fate had taken him in hand and brought him face to face with a fairy. But all the same he was on the horns of a dilemma. If Habba Khatoon was not liked by his mother, what would he do. Would he break away with his mother and revolt against her decision? He had all his life loved and respected her. If he felt affection for Habba Khatoon alone, his other wives would grow jealous and harass him all his life. He grew quite thin and lost his appetite, which made his mother regard him with concern, for he was a jewel of a son and she loved him immensely. She suggested a herbal tonic, but Yusuf knew that no tonic would help him. He wanted a draught of the magic elixir of love to cure his complaint.

"Something will have to be done soon. Let me call a *mushaira*, a poetic symposium," thought Yusuf and ceased to think about the outcome. Yusuf, after so many days of hard thinking and worry, reached the point when to look on a day ahead is to presume too greatly upon a future in which the Fate is to decide so much. So one day he went to his mother and told her:

"Mother, I shall hold a poetic symposium, where great poets and scholars would participate and also invite Habba Khatoon to recite the verses. Then you can see her and decide."

"A capital idea! Do hold it immediately," replied his mother. As days passed and Habba heard nothing from Yusuf Shah she again relapsed into black moods and sang day in and day out:

My Love, what pleasure in my living;
When you are far afar, out of sight;
Come, I shall give you bouquets
Of pomegranate flowers and basil bright.

Up the hill-side and down in the glade
I have been looking for you,
Helpless and unhappy; you left me so desolate.
Come, I shall make for you bouquets
Of pomegranàte flowers and basil bright.

Yusuf Shah regained his health as he plunged into activity and began making preparations for the *mushaira* and the magnificent feast for the occasion. The date was fixed and the invitations were sent for.

PART 4

# WIFE OF HEIR APPARENT

I keenly surveyd the world;
It is a blessing to find one's Love--
The ascetic lives in a cave,
The devotee wanders among flowers,
The lover longs for the beloved.
How fortunate to find one's Love!

—*Khwaja Habib*

# 16

# *Call of Destiny*

"Ama Bab!"

The voice that had been singing stopped abruptly and Habba Khatoon lifted her hands from the *Santoor*, as she rose to meet the visitor, Khawaja Ahmad Khan, the Headman of Chandrara and Pampore and a few adjacent villages. She was alone in the house, others having gone to a neighbour's house.

"Is it barbarous of me to come at such a time and interrupt your practising?" he asked. "But I have come to ask you a favour, a great favour and I came to you directly when I got this."

He held a letter out to her and still standing read it through twice, while he stood watching her.

The June sunshine fell upon the softness of her hair and made it seem black threads of silk; it flickered about her tall, straight form and fell upon the downcast face, on which the colour came and went in swift and soft flushes. The man fell to wondering as the seconds flew by, what her answer would be to his request and whether the favour he had asked for would be granted.

A certain gravity spread over the natural brightness of his own face, the smile of his eyes faded a little, all at once and she looked up and her clear dark eyes met his fully and squarely.

"I don't think that I quite understand what you want me to do?" asked Habba.

"That note reached me this morning from the great queen. They have a concert or a symposium in the palace. The gathering would be their own persons of the palace and some scholars and poets and chief nobles and their ladies. The chief singer has failed—well, you see the note says that there is a sweet-throated singer in Chandhara."

"Yes, I see all that. But where do I come in?"

Again those clear eyes of hers which irresistibly reminded him of a stream of clear water, looked into his. For a moment he shifted even so slightly from one foot to the other, his gaze fell a little before hers.

He had recovered himself in an instant. "The great queen asks me to help her. In Chandhara, well, I thought of you at once. You and your beautiful voice—will you come and help?"

A great flush of indignation swept her face from brow to shin. Her eyes flashed ominiously.

"I think you must have forgotten my respect you ever had for me," she said slowly. "I am not a courtesan, nor a public singer. If you ask me to come to the king's palace . . ." A little scorn slipped into her voice.

A man's keen eyes looked straight into her flashing ones, so nearly on a level with his own; a dusky red mounted to his forehead.

"There is no woman I respect more than I do you in this world," he said, "and still I ask you to come to the palace and under my escort. You have always been good to me. You have never failed me in anything I asked you to do. Will you fail me now?"

A little smile hovered the face uplifted to his, but the indignation had not died out of her eyes.

"Look here, Ahmad Bab," she said, "you have been kind to me. But it is very different to be asked to go to a house like Royal Palace. No, I can't do that."

Her lips set a little firmly but the man's strong mouth set firmly too. It was a clear case of "Greek meets Greek." "It is of no use pretending to each other, Habba, I should not like to take you there but the request comes directly from the great queen herself".

"You are, at least, frank, Ahmad Bab."

"But don't be cross with me," and all at once a tender inflexion crept into his deep voice. "I swear I am not asking you to do this because I am wanting in respect for you. Ya Allah! what an idea! You are the only woman I know who could tackle the situation."

"Will you trust me?" he said eagerly." I know I am asking you to do a distasteful thing. I know it is difficult to understand why I should ask you, but I have a real good reason for it, you know, you must know—I would not put you into an equivocal position." A softness came about her eyes. He had helped her in many ways and it was difficult to resist doing what he asked as a favour. Besides, it was a royal command. There was something ominous in the situation.

Silence fell between them again. She looked with a half questioning glance at his tall, strong form—the face, whose chief characteristic was strength; the eyes that always seemed to look out so squarely and straight even in their depths. There was a strange pleading in them.

The indignation had died out of her voice. "It hurts me at first that you could have dreamt of asking me to the Palace as if I was a courtesan. But I do trust you, of course"—her eyes smiled into his—"and if I can help you by coming, I—"

"You will come? It is good of you to take it all on trust. Some day you will know why I asked you to do such an extraordinary thing, now I can only say, thank you a thousand times."

He wished her well and then was gone with the words, "I'll let you know about all the arrangements tomorrow."

Habba Khatoon stood in the sunlight, pondering deeply. Unconventional and unwordly though she was, she had no special knowledge of life and the world.

The queen was entertaining a party of close but distinguished guests; there were poets, scholars and high dignitaries of the state. They were all assembled in a large room when a girl called Meh Jabeen sitting near the queen leant across to her hostess.

"Must we be horribly civil to this singer of Chandhara. By the way, someone said once that women folk from the villages are always impossible. Is this one—she may be amusing if she is—". All other ladies, on hearing it, laughed.

"She is not an ordinary rustic woman." The queen glanced at the ladies with half-closed eyes and a little insolent smile. "We will see."

*Mohatarim* Ahmed Khan, Nambardar, and *Mohtarima* Habba Khatoon were announced. A silence fell on the group of people scattered over the great room drinking tea and chattering as the queen rose and moved forward to receive her special guest.

Habba Khatoon's lovely face, her extreme charm of manners, her simple yet exquisite dress, were calculated to make some women a little awkward, not to mention the natural shyness which anyone might be justified in feeling on coming into a big room full of strangers; all this flashed through the minds of many of the onlookers as they turned to watch the entrance of new guests.

But there was no trace of awkwardness in the tall and modest looking woman who came into the room followed by the Headman of the village. There was only a certain emphasized dignity in her carriage, a little stateliness in the movement of her graceful figure, a certain queenliness in the poise of her head.

"Head well put on," a man said to Meh Jabeen, a noble's wife.

"Where is our dowdy, respectable prig?" The woman flashed back at him. "She is as well dressed as any princess!" The queen's greeting of her guest was graceful as she alone knew how to make it and the astonishment she undoubtedly felt was in no way apparent. The woman before her was not at all the one she had pictured to herself.

The words of Yusuf ran through her mind as she led her guest to sit near her her own seat. The king also had a pleased expression on his face, a strong wish in his kindly heart that such a woman should live in a palace rather than in a cottage.

"What do you think of your pet son's protege?" the queen asked the king, as they sauntered together on the terrace.

"Think? Oh, she is very handsome, very good mannered, very well dressed. I wish that—"

"You wish what?"

Her voice grew all at once low and wistful, a cloud fell upon her beautiful face. The king glanced at her in surprise, then laughed.

When everyone was seated comfortably the Qazi of the city announced : "First, Jinab Yakub Sahib Sarfi will recite his verses." Yakub stood from his seat and recited some verses.

The hall resounded with cheers.

Badayuni was also present and so were other poets; some of them also recited their poems. Last came Habba Khatoon's

turn. She stood before the audience in the hall of the palace and as the first notes of her voice rang through the room, a hush fell on the crowd of the smartly dressed, chattering persons in front of her:

Which, my rival, has ravished you
That you have turned away from me;
Do you not loving like to be?
Oh, why do you despise me!

At midnight I open the doors for you;
Ah! would you for a moment come to me?
Forsaken I am, though one we be.
Oh, why do you despise me!

My Love, in the fire of your love I burn;
I but desire and dream of you;
Shed I tears of blood from my almond-like eyes.
Oh, why do you despise me!

Wink of sleep have I not, indifferent are you,
That is the sorrow and grief of my heart;
My heart's pain you alone can soothe.
Oh, why do you despise me!

Bathe I and bridal dress I wear;
I swear to welcome and greet but you,
But you spurn and go away from me.
Oh, why do you despise me!

Drop by drop I shed the tears;
I, the miserable pine and crave for you;
Why forget the path that leads to me?
Oh, why do you despise me!

The wonderful words rose and fell in the wonderful voice into a very passion of tenderness. Never had anyone among the listners heard the voice so 'thrilling and so sweet with passion's honey notes. It was not the voice alone, it was the thought and words and the radiant beauty of the singer which

enchanted everyone. A great wave of colour swept over her face as she moved away amid the thunders of applause that followed the end of her song.

"On oath of God! the woman knows what she is singing about, doesn't she? Not so innocent as you think is Habba Khatoon. She is no novice in the ways of love. I'll take my oath, her eyes seem to have bewitched you!" the king whispered the words into his queen's ears.

She flashed round on him and he saw that her eyes were misty.

"You and I don't know the elementary meaning of the word love," she said in a low vehement voice. "She knows the love which she sings about, no other. Don't sneer at her, I can't stand it, somehow. Did you see how Yusuf watched her tonight. She is worth watching, better than the rest of us." Then the queen turned away from him, her eyes still dim, with a curious softness upon her face.

Yusuf sauntered into the great conservatory in the evening. Habba Khatoon stood alone and had come for a tiny breathing-space to the quiet place among the flowers.

Yusuf glanced at her approvingly. The flush brought to her face by her song still lingered there; a certain soft brightness was in her eyes, a little smile about her mouth.

He strolled to her side.

"Tired, Habba?" he asked.

She started. The brightness in her eyes died away; her smile faded. She drew herself up.

"A little," she answered and moved towards the door. But the prince barred the way.

"Leave me, please, the queen-mother has called me. Between two scales, equally loaded, a feather's weight will turn the scale; who knows what the queen decides", said Habba.

The queen moved restlessly to and fro in her tiny boudoir, which she called her sanctum. She had dressed early for dinner and had planned a pleasant hour in the tiny, beautiful room that looked over the wide park and the far off hills. But she was impatient. She walked to the window and looked out.

A soft knock sounded on the door and the queen bounced hastily to see the very person whom she had called and been thinking of on the threshold along with her lady-in-waiting.

The attendant along with Habba Khatoon entered. Habba Khatoon bowed low and before she could say anything, the queen said:

"Sorry to bother you. I called you to the symposium to see you, assess you and tell you something important."

"What is about her that makes me like her whether I will or not?" the queen's thought ran." Is it her charm or her frankness, or the sheer crystal purity in her eyes?"

In the other woman's mind much the same train of thought was crossing about the queen.

"What a marvellous fascination is about her! I could love her easily. A woman with such a face and voice is the best choice for her son."

"You see, noble woman, I want to marry you to my son and thereby make you my daughter. I may, however, warn you that Yusuf started upon a career of astounding extravagance and dissipation. He is not altogether to be blamed for this. His wives are responsible for it. He has very good qualities of head and heart. He is never a hypocrite. He is generous and sincere. His happiness should be your only concern," said the queen. Habba Khatoon looked down in a shy manner and gave a faint smile, that tardy and delightful smile of hers. For an instance she hesitated and she looked at her with deliberation. Habba felt that it was time to speak; it would be stupid to assent by silence, as Kashmiri girls

generally do in such circumstances. Therefore she spoke frankly and boldly yet in the lowest tone and in a humble manner like one who feels a process of torture beginning. A wrong word here and high tone there, the queen-mother's anger might leap out and burn her to ashes. But then she thought of God and mustered courage. Turning towards her with a look that was half beseeching she said with distinct decision:

"*Madir-i-Meharaban*, you can't expect me to marry him here and now. My parents don't know. Besides, it should be a proper marriage under proper Islamic manner performed at my place. Kings and princes, I have heard, are wont to have courtesans and concubines in the palace harem. I won't live like one, rather I would die soon and not live like one. The marriage must be performed in the presence of my parents and a respected Mulla and a Qazi."

Doubts assailed Habba Khatoon. She now waited for the queen's reply. The queen was astonished at Habba Khatoon's boldness, self-respect and sharp intellect. The queen smiled. She assured her that all would be done properly as desired by her. Then she called the prince.

There was nothing in Habba's demeanour—gay, charming and frank as usual—to suggest that anything troubled her. Yusuf came and his mother congratulated him and gave her consent. She told him what Habba had said. Yusuf had already told his mother that he loved Habba not only for her beauty of person—slim and straight, with the proud carriage of her head—but still more for the beauty of her soul. With truthfulness, her rigid sense of honour, her fearless outlook, she was every inch a royal princess.

Ali Shah, the king, too had seen Habba Khatoon and found her a lady of charm and excellence, modesty and beauty. She had all the gifts to enchant the heart. He said," If I may judge her intelligence, she had inner quality of subtle apprehension."

"So you thought we brought you here as a common singer and made a courtesan of you and so you looked daggers at me," Yusuf addressed to Habba Khatoon. She kept silent.

Then the Headman was called and the news was broken to him and gifts sent to her parents.

After a sumptuous dinner Habba Khatoon was sent home under royal escort. The air was still bland and springlike and above the roofs the stars and the moon were shining leisurely in a dark blue sky when Habba Khatoon was back at Chandhara and was embraced by her parents, who had already known about the good fortune.

# 17

# *Royal Wedding*

Habba Khatoon was a charmer. With her graceful manner and soft attractive voice she could disarm anybody. Yusuf had in the real sense fallen deeply in love with her. Previously, of course, his behaviour had been motivated by whims and they were difficult to be explained in logical terms. Now for several days Yusuf had been brooding and thinking and refusing to attend to any work. What was the reason for his restlessness? A house was bought for Abdi Rather's family in a posh colony but Habba Khatoon refused to leave the picturesque village with its streams and springs and warbling bulbuls. "Was she not essentially a poet?" she wrote to Yusuf. The queen, his mother, felt anxious and came to him. He greeted her with unrestrained eagerness.

"What is the matter with you, my darling son?"

"Mother, I feel a strange sensation, some sort of fear. Now I must marry Habba Khatoon immediately or else I shall get mad with conflicting thoughts and indecision."

"Yes, my darling, you will be happy in her company," replied his mother.

The following day the prince sent Habba Khatoon opulent ornaments, clothes and some documents. The documents

revealed that Abdi Rathar had been granted a jagir and he must immediately reconstruct a house suited to his new status. The palace overseers and artisans will be sent to help. He was also instructed that he must wear clothes befitting a noble. Likewise Habba must live in a royal style and not go about in the village. After some time maid servants and other servants were sent to attend and serve her.

As instructed, Habba lived a quiet life, keeping out of village society. She read a lot. Her only serious occupation was writing long notes. Abdi got built a marvellous three-storied house with a number of rooms and there was one special room assigned to Habba.

It irritated Yusuf that Habba Khatoon would remain in the village and then he should go with his people to marry her there but he could do nothing against her will. He was to do what she desired.

There is a belief that each man has his soul-mate and such an ideal mate Yusuf had found in Habba Khatoon. Habba Khatoon herself had been told by Kesho Pandit in a different language about the transmigration of soul. He had told her that her real man had been seeking her from one existence to another, so had Sheikh Masud told her that she was destined to marry her ideal mate.

Through some unknown force Yusuf found it difficult to command Habba Khatoon to shift to Srinagar. Therefore, a new house was built at Chandhara for the Rathars. The rooms were all beautiful and furnished with carpets and brocade hangings and couches etc. There was an ante room adjacent to Habba Khatoon's room for her maid and then a small store room for keeping Habba Khatoon's things. Later on arrived the royal staff for her.

Then, after some days, on a clear night, while Habba Khatoon and her parents sat at supper in the house, there came a knock at the door. It was opened and a man passed in

wrapped in a charming cloak. The man bowed." Ah! His Highness"; they all stood up and bowed low in amazement. This nocturnal visit of Yusuf Shah was unusual.

"Well, well," he said sharply, fixing his keen glance upon Habba's face and she also watched him covertly through the long lashes which fringed her charming eyes. "Let me see your new house. How long can Habba remain far from the madding crowd of the city?" They took him round and showed him every room. He briefly gave them the programme of the wedding and told them where to accommodate each class of persons. One room had to be specially decorated for the His Majesty, the king, and his special guests. He said that he would send a golden couch for the king's room. Habba Khatoon could appoint her own lady-in-waiting whom she could take with her to the palace. But then she would be provided with another lady-in-waiting who had been trained in the manners and etiquette of the court. He felt satisfied with everything and his eyes flashed and he stretched himself up and looked dignified. There is none who does not value that gift most rare that no gold can buy — a charming woman's unfeigned love. Yusuf could not stay to eat anything. He quietly left in the darkness of the night. Thus, next day, a courier came with quite a number of soldiers carrying material and money and a letter from the prince. He bowed to the ground before Habba Khatoon and handed over the letter and the money to her. He told her some part of the money should be given to the Headman to be distributed among the villagers who should illuminate their houses with oil lamps on the night of their wedding. A wide road would be constructed within a few days and the soliders were to be posted there to guard the Rathar's house.

Habba Khatoon was not simply decorative — a mere joy to the eye. She had real qualities of sharp intellect and imagination. She was interested in the house decoration and designing gold ornaments and patterns of dresses. Thus she herself

instructed the artisans in these arts and the result was that she had superb clothes and jewellery.

One day in the year 1570 A.D. trumpet blasts and drum beating were heard on the streets of Srinagar. The proclamation said :

> "Listen, the people of Kashmir and rejoice. It is the wedding of the heir-apparent, the kind and noble and glorious Yusuf Shah Chak after a few days. In the last quarter of the day he will go to Chandhara in a river procession. Everyone should collect on the river banks and cry greetings to the great prince. The houses on the river banks should be decorated with flowers and coloured cloth. There should be proper decoration. It is a royal command that woman should collect on the banks of the river and sing traditional songs and wish health and happiness to the prince. Rice and clothes and money would be distributed among the poor. The king desires that all should participate in his joy. The houses should be illuminated when the prince returns the next evening. There will be fire-works. The roads should be decorated with arches and buntings and flowers and incense be burnt in *Kangaris* when the prince with his bride and the retinue passes by the road."

The river procession was indeed splendid. The sterns of the front line *doongar* were covered with glorious brocades. Then there were one hundred and one boats of different colours—green, yellow, blue and other colours and the oars were of silver colour with bells attached to them which produced music as they touched water. And there in the centre of the largest vessel, seated on a dais was the king and the prince in robes of green silk. All about them were rosy-cheeked boys in white and yellow clothes fanning them with large fans. Behind the dais stood soldiers in splendid armour and their swords drawn. Placed on high stools were large *Kangris* in which burned incense. In this boat was also seated the Prime Minister Bhat and other nobles wearning rich clothes and their uniformed servants. Then in the other boats, singing sweetly to the beat of the oars, were lovely women and in others were the dancing girls. It was all a dream of luxury.

As the boats drew near Pampore all its people crowded in hundreds on the docks. There were women singing and men crying "*Badshah Salaamat Zindabad, Shahzaada Sahib Zindabad.*" The procession landed and a large number of horses were ready to carry them to Abdi Rathar's house. Now it had become little dark and the whole of Chandhara looked shining and twinkling from the upland of Pampore. It was a heavenly vision. The musicians were playing trumpets and *shehnai.*

"You will shine like the moon on the sky and destiny will not consult you when it will bestow its blessings on you," Habba Khatoon remembered the words of the learned and pious man, Sheikh Masud. She dismissed the past and trod upon it and put it out as one treads on a coal that is smouldering and dangerous.

For the people it was a day of rejoicing and feasting but for Habba it was the first day of her destiny and she must prepare to face it. Her preparations were different and significant. She bathed in rose water and her long tresses were washed in oil of sesame and in hot milk until they were soft and shining like the black threads of silk. She was dressed in green silk robes, a red silk vest and white silk mantle of the most lovely quality. This was in the Mughal style which had become fashion in the Kashmiri aristocracy. She had diamond rings round her fingers, necklaces of beautiful pearls round her neck, gold earrings to match the necklace, turquoise bracelets for her wrists. She applied the scent of musk to herself. Over her shoulders fell the mass of black hair. Her head was made splendid by a cap of gold cloth and a gold tiara studded with diamonds which sent round her head in front and heron's plumes sweeping back upon her hair. The red scarf was placed on the head.

So Habba Khatoon advanced among the carpets where sat the king and the prince and many other eminent persons. The marriage contract, allowing the woman for dowry a dozen chests of valuable ornaments and equal number of bags of gold coins. Then Habba Khatoon got up and came away

blessed by the king and other dignatories. The king moving his fistful of coins round her head scattered among the throng and the *nakaras* thundered declaring the settlement of the marriage.

Then the king rose and went from group to group of men, his servants carrying *khilat*, court robes. To some were given swords, court robes to others and costly girdles to special nobles. Then everybody was busy in eating and drinking. While the nobles and the warriors lay contended and more than drowsy the singers and musicians squatted among them. The musicians were playing on *rabaab* and *santoor* and recited plaintively in mellow voices Persian and Kashmiri songs. Then there was *Bacha nagma, Hafiz nagma* and *banda pathar*, one following the other.

In the meantime, Habba Khatoon had again changed her dress and came in different robes. Her clean fair skin was tinted white with rice powder. A black line was drawn over the eyebrows with kohl. The day had almost dawned and Habba Khatoon's women had come to help her. With them they had brought the chests of her belongings. They found Habba tremble. All her relatives had also come there. Their eyes were wet but they dare not weep or sob but they all *salaamed* the young lord and bowed on the ground before the king. Habba Khatoon was led to the palanquin which she entered along with her lady-in-waiting. Then a groom led a white Arab steed over the carpets, a smoothed paced horse of racing blood, brocade caperisoning hanging over its saddle. Upon the steed Yusuf climbed and the musicians led the procession of the horsemen. They passed the triumphal arches built at various places and the people on both sides of the road, cheering and damsels sprinkling perfume and throwing flower petals.

In was the year 1570 A.D. when Habba Khatoon entered the royal palace as a bride of the heir apparent, Yusuf Shah Chak. The day was joyful yet tiresome for the prince and he

immediately left for his room to have a nap. As Habba Khatoon was conducted to her room, the first thing she wanted to see was her future home. She peeped through the window. It was a vast conglomeration of smaller palaces, pleasure gardens and mosques. The outer walls were high with battlements, planted around were tall poplars and chinars.

Habba Khatoon was installed in a grand, oriently furnished apartment. Although some ladies and the few maid servants lived in separate houses but she immediately found out that her apartment was elegant and luxurious and adjacent to it was Yusuf's. Her bedroom was beautiful beyond imagination—beautifully furnished with green and red carpets and draperies of soft silk. On the walls were beautiful mirrors inlaid with gold and gems. There were also Mughal miniatures, flower vases of paper mache and silver which made the room enchanting. The air in the room was sweet with perfume. There were beautiful articles of decoration made of walnut wood and *papier-mache* and silver. At the farther end of the chamber was a couch with a cover of gleaming satin and surrounded by a net of finest silken gauze. Habba looked upon the swinging lamps filled with scented oil and she was unusually delighted.

Yusuf Shah, after the day's sleep, entered Habba's room. There she lay the fairest thing. The web of dark hair flowed all about her. One white rounded arm made a pillow for her head. Her rich lips were parted in a smile, showing the ivory lines of teeth and her rosy limbs were draped in a thin robe of silk held about her by a jewelled girdle so that the white gleam of flesh shone through it. Yusuf stood astonished and then bending gently shook her and she opened her eyes.

"Darling, it is getting dark. We are all assembled on the balcony to see the fireworks," said Yusuf. She got up to change her clothes. She had been given a maid, Meh Jabeen, as her lady-in-waiting. She was only a couple of years older to Habba but she seemed quite mature and experienced. This maid

helped Habba in dressing. Then Yusuf came and with him Habba walked calmly and carelessly, her arms folded on her chest and her eyes gazing at nothing as it were. There she found her mother-in-law, the king and other ladies. The king was charming and called her "dearest daughter." There was a great deal of conspiratorial whispering between the aunts and the other wives of Yusuf. The senior wife of Yusuf had a son, Yakub. He seemed to like Habba Khatoon and made a flourishing *salaam* to her but his mother disliked her on sight. She gave Habba a venomous glare and whispered something to her son who stood by. Yusuf had three more sons by his other wives; one was called Aiba Khan the others were Mirza Ibrahim and Qasim Khan. Yusuf was justified in feeling disgusted with his other wives. Everybody made comparison between Habba Khatoon and the other wives of Yusuf within the hearing of them and it enraged them. In future they always greeted Habba blandly and maintained conversation with her on a formal level.

All along the palace garden the trees were decorated with lamps that would be delightful when it was dark. The fountains were splashing the coloured water. As it became dark the sky was suddenly illuminated with fireworks. The king said joyfully to Habba, "All this is in your honour, dearest daughter." Then there were shining stars in the atmosphere and different designs of lights of the fireworks. Large blasts of sounds were heard all through the city. Habba Khatoon felt happy and was in wonder, for she had never seen such a magical display. There was a scowl on the faces of the aunts and the two wives of Yusuf but Habba Khatoon altogether ignored them.

Afterwards they all had sumptuous meal but, as was her habit, Habba Khatoon ate very little. That was the reason that she was slender, graceful and charming. It was the most thrilling experience of her life. She was really happy. She had the splendid feeling that everything was coming right. She

smiled shyly, though dazzingly and aroused cheers from her mother-in-law and the ladies of the important *amirs* and *vazirs*.

In her room Habba Khatoon unclasped the girdle of her cloak and took it off to give Yusuf the sight of a beauteous form. The Mughal types of robes clung sweetly about her dainty limbs and blossom-like form. She unfastened her gold fillet which bound her curly hair. She threw her sleepers inlaid with gold flowers. As Yusuf entered the room she blushed and her dark sparkling eyes were downcast with modesty but smiles trembled about her lips and dimples on her cheeks. He came and put his arms round her and kissed her with a smile and there was a light in his eyes. Then he paused bubbling with passion and with a sudden burst of passion he leapt into his bed as if the sight of her beauty had struck him like a blow. Slowly and softly she too walked towards the bed after blowing out the lights. And then the union was fairer than the fairest dream; all was bliss.

The days following the wedding was full of festivities and ceremonies and Habba Khatoon was hustled from one to another. Next day there was *bacha-nagma*, where beautiful boys danced in the attire of girls. This was enjoyed by the palace-inmates and others but Habba Khatoon yawned all the time and felt it was the most ridiculous performance. She knew that she was being closely watched and her conduct might be considered as ill-mannered. It was also enjoyed by the royal family.

Habba Khatoon, within a couple of days, found that the people were quite different from her. She was unsubtle, more natural, she might seem uncultured in comparison. She said what she meant and she did not hide her feeling under the burden of aristocratic etiquette. There was *Hafiz-nagma* on another day which the royal family considered marvellous which Habba Khatoon openly expressed as being vulgar for the dancers had no idea of rhythm and appropriate gestures. But Habba Khatoon was growing light-hearted in the

company of these high-ups. She discovered they were inferior to her in intellectual attainments. She paid several visits to the king and the queen. Whenever Habba Khatoon saw the king he was so good to her that she felt happy and believed both the parents liked her immensely, particularly her mother-in-law's attachment was perfect dotage; she was a great success. Her youthful beauty and cheerful personality created a stir in the staid palace circles; rich wives of nobles were effusively kind to her, and she was accepted without hesitation in their company. Although so many beauties shone in the palace but everyone admitted that Habba eclipsed them all.

After some time, one night a terrible accident happened to Habba Khatoon. She had passed the evening in her mother-in-law's company. At night when she was proceeding from the queen's parlour to her own, her foot slipped and she fell with a thud on the floor and broke her arm. A loud shriek escaped her mouth and her maids came at once and carried her to her bed-room. She got a high fever and lay in bed for a month as her arm was fractured at the elbow. Hakims and bone-specialists were called but their efforts were futile. But in spite of her pain she was enjoying her illness for the attention it brought her. The king, his queen and Yusuf were anxious for her. She could luxuriate in the care and endless concern of Yusuf who seemed to think of nothing at all but her comfort. He refused to leave her alone at night. It was a big crisis. He felt a great emotional strain. He left attending anything but sat by his wife's sick-bed, giving her medicines. Everry day with tears in his eyes he prayed fervently. Alms were distributed among the poor in the mornings.

A month passed. At last a cowherd came and set the bone right and tied a sling and gave some herbs to be boiled in water for her to drink. By this treatment Habba was completely cured. The cowherd was loaded with gold and given a robe of honour.

But to Habba no illness had ever been so pleasant. She remained in bed for many days even after the pain and trouble had disappeared. Popped in bed, she looked pale and fragile.

"Thanks to Allah! you are well now. I had lost hope when your fever would not go down," said Yusuf.

Habba smiled a gentle wistful smile, so young and artless, that it clutched his heart. He felt happy and assured.

"Habba, you see, since your recovery everyone is wishing everyone else good luck; the people of Kashmir are happy," said Yusuf.

"My lord, now that I have got you, sickness and death do not frighten me any more," she remarked.

Habba stood and watched him go out smiling; there were tears of joy in her eyes.

# 18

# *Wanderlust*

"Was she to spend her life in the distinguished seculsion of the royal harem," thought Habba Khatoon but no, Yusuf Shah would come and be with her all the time and frolicked with her. They often rowed in a *shikara* in the Dal Lake, Habba with her shoes off and her ankles trailing in the water, screaming with delightful laughter to hear the jokes of Yusuf. At the shore of the lake they would get out to lie dreamily in the thick grass, watching clouds as they formed and passed overhead. Habba would loiter about and collect water-lilies to take to the palace for arranging them in the vases. Then her maid servant would open the willow basket and take out their repast to eat with joy. They never quarrelled. They would lay on the grass side by side talking and singing till late in the evening and then return to the palace.

One day Yusuf Shah said to Habba Khatoon, "For the first time for years I begin to feel happiness. Come on, get up, I'll give you the surprise of your life."

They both came out and meandered hand in hand through the throng of servants and courtiers some distance from the main palace till they reached a large gate. Habba Khatoon perceived through a long vista of immense trees, a dwelling, elegant to an unusual degree.

"Hey, what do you say, this is Bagh-i-Yusuf which I recently got prepared and here we shall live like two lovebirds in a cosy nest," said Yusuf Shah.

Habba Khatoon had a mixed feeling of surprise and joy. She entered with her husband, her feet making no sound upon the matting elastically soft as forest turf and found herself in a reception room of the building. A delicious quiet pervaded the mansion. Then from another door entered a young girl who lifted her hands to her breasts and bowed low in salutation. She was slender and her black hair was interwoven with white blossoms of almonds.

"She is Azizi and sings and dances well and can be your attendant and companion in singing," informed Yusuf to his wife. Habba rejoiced in her heart at having this fair and sweet girl as her serving maid.

The royal couple got up and came to a cherry bower where a sort of canopy was formed by the vines. There, seated on carpets, were musicians waiting for them with their instruments. They all got up and bowed to them.

"These, Habba, are the best musicians of the state and they will help you in your compositions, whenever you like. I would now ask you to sing a few songs with me," said Yusuf Shah to Habba Khatoon. And they sang and their voices rose through the perfumed evening like the voices of the birds of Paradise. Yet a moment came when Yusuf Shah, overcome by the witchery of his companion's voice, could only listen in speechless ecstasy. The evening stars in the sky swam bright before his eyes. Tears of pleasures trickled down the musicians' eyes.

Next day they wandered in a fanciful boat in the Dal Lake and had their lunch and tea at the two islands, called Gold Island and Silver Island (Sona Lank and Ropa Lank in Kashmiri). These islands had been created by Sultán Zain-ul-Abdin in the centre of the lake. From there they went to a garden situated on the bank of the lake.

All round the sides of the Dal existed magnificent gardens, some of which were ruined due to lack of their upkeep and disuse, but one garden, improved by Zain-ul-Abdin, was still full of splendour and beauty. There were large chinars, apple and cherry trees and flowers of variegated colours and there in the moonlit night Yusuf Shah and Habba Khatoon walked about and the murmuring stream and the small waterfalls splashed over stones and fern grottoes, broke the stillness of the night. "To breathe the air of the garden is to breathe poetry," said Habba in her ecstasy and she sang melodously.

Then Habba Khatoon become calm, serious and melancholy.

"What is the matter with you? In my soul you are an angel, in a place lofty, secure and immaculate", said Yusuf. And then he supported her as they walked along. The garden was long and broad with natural divisions made by high mounds and banks. Surely, the whole environment inspired the sensitive souls of Yusuf and Habba to write verses of high romance.

Habba Khatoon had read the legends of old kings together with the history of Kashmir's past. She had also read many Persian stories telling of the peoples and the kings and the Persian poets of the past. She was eloquent of speech and to listen to her was joy. As Yusuf would put his arm round her waist she would narrate to him some joyful tale.

Towns and villages could not satisfy the wonderlust of the royal couple. They now wanted to go to far off places where nature could be seen in its naked beauty, unalloyed by the hands of man. They loved nature's elemental forces instinctively and wanted to be far away from the noise and din of the city.

"Why not go to Gurez, wherefrom my mother had come. I have never been there. To go to Gurez has been one absorbing desire of my life. Moreover, in our journey there we will find

the matchless grandeur and unparalleled sublimity of nature," suggested Habba Khatoon.

"Surely, we must go there. We Chaks also originally belonged to that area of Dardistan," replied Yusuf.

The royal couple left for Ganderbal, a village on the bank of the Vulur Lake, in August. They rode on till they arrived at a suspense bridge leading into Gurez. There were some girls crossing the bridge and Habba found a great joy on seeing the girls as if she had met her cousins after a long time. Yusuf and Habba crossed the bridge and enquired about the Chieftain of the place. They were shown a hillock on which was a building; it was the residence of the Chieftain. Someone had gone ahead to inform the Chieftain of their arrival; The Shah, as he was called, came along with his family members to welcome the royal guests. They informed Habba Khatoon that they had not heard about her relatives and they themselves had no relations with her. "Possibily her relatives had died since long," said the new ruler of Gurez. Tears started in her eyes, when she entered into the house. That probably was the house where her mother was born and where she grew up, as she could recognize from the description given by her mother to Habba Khatoon. Many a poignant thought came to her mind. Habba Khatoon gave them gifts and money and promised them to send blankets and clothes from Srinagar.

They went round the town and saw the houses made of wood. They stood in rows and loads of dirt were scattered in front of them. After taking rest for the night they went to the village Budwon and had a glance of the valley which had for its background a conical shaped mountain.

Habba was thrilled by the conical mountain. They sat together at the bottom of this wonderful mountain. The scene was delightful and she sang:

Come, let us go in quest of my Love
Wherever he is known to resort.

Since the time he turned cool
Love for me is waning in him;
The moonlit nights have turned all dark
For he indulges in dalliance with others.

Who, my rival follows him
For to unknown haunts runs away he;
I fell struck with a hot knife;
Streams of tears pour from my eyes.
Uphill and downdale I shall seek him out
No matter wherever he be.

Friend, none can escape the buffets of fate;
Fresh like a jessamine, now I wither away.
My early youth was like an almond in bloom;
Would that he came to enjoy it!
To me Yusuf's figure is enthralling,
Is worth all the realms and more.

"You know, Habba, our destinies are now one," said Yusuf.

"Yes"

"What do you think of me now?"

"Now? Now you are exactly what I dreamt you were, such as I always loved you."

"Habba! Habba"! he whispered and kissed her.

There was a lightning and Habba felt afraid and Yusuf took her in his arms and again kissed her. This conical mountain was named Habba Bal by Yusuf in memory of that delightful day. Then they returned to Srinagar. Habba Khatoon was more than happy when she reached Srinagar.

After a long rest, Yusuf and Habba left early in the morning for Aharbal. There the river Vishov falls some 50 feet over a precipice. The torrent made a mile further down the wonderful Aharbal falls. They were full of joy to see the Aharbal waterfalls. Just near the fall they discovered some plain

ground, where they camped. A small crowd of goatherds collected there and sat in a circle.

The two among them get up and began to dance. They had their own delightful rhythms and brandished swords to the tune of a pipe which a third man played. Some of them beat drums, it turned out a festive gathering and Habba Khatoon ordered food and clothing to be distributed among them. They were Gujjars who came from the plains with their flocks of cattle and buffaloes and spent summer in these meadows. Habba Khatoon composed beautiful verses here which became very popular. Then the camp moved to Srinagar.

After some days Yusuf Shah and Habba Khatoon left for Achabal, which is 64 kms from Islamabad. There is a beautiful stream which comes out of Sosanwor hill and flows out of it and runs with low murmurings. It was a lovely sight and had been a place for many a royal feast and merry-making in the good old days. The garden was full of fruit trees—apple, pears, plums, apricots and cherry. There was a lofty cascade which formed a marvellous sight. Nearby was a village. At the back of the garden was the side of a mountain covered with deodar forest. For several days the couple stayed there enjoying the folk songs of the villagers.

Yusuf Shah and Habba Khatoon wandered among the beauty spots of Kashmir. One fine day they drove on horseback through popular avenues and rice and maize fields till they reached a village called Tangmarg, situated on the shelf of a hill at a distance of twenty-four miles from Srinagar. Here they rested for the night and the next day they rode upwards on the road which wound among the blue pines. They saw beautiful flowers of variegated colours and then after going three and a half miles they emerged at the top of an extensive plain. They were simply wonderstruck at the beauty and the splendour of the place. Yusuf Shah got a building construction there and they spent a month there. The spot became a regular haunt of the couple and they gave it the name of Gulmarg, the meadow of flowers.

Yusuf Shah and Habba Khatoon sat there on a rock. Yusuf looked at his wife and was struck by a new spiritual beauty in her face. He couldn't suppress his emotion.

"Do you love me, Habba?" he whispered to her.

"Don't you know that you are all my life to me. I can't think of you and myself apart for a minute," she replied.

"I also feel bliss when you are with me and singing."

She let her eyes rest on him, full of love and said nothing further. She could not express the complexity of her feeling. Yusuf continued to say," You know there is only one happiness in life, that is love and that is why Sheikh Masud, the great Darvesh, called you Habba Khatoon, the Lady of Love.

After some time, the royal couple made a trip from Srinagar to Sonamarg. They saw narrow upland valleys; there were deep gorges and grassy meadows and beautiful villages at some close distance. They had to cross Sindh stream at Voyil, 27 kms from Srinagar, and they rode along its banks. They had to pass through several villages situated at the bottom of the mountain covered with forests. Then they had to leave behind the valley at Ganganagir and to go through the gorge. The mountain, overhung the valley of Sonamarg. It is full of golden flowers. They felt extremely tired and rested for a couple of days there before they came back to Srinagar.

# 19

# *Anger and Anguish*

One day Habba Khatoon was called by Ali Shah, the king, in his chamber where his wife was also present. After some rambling talk the king said:

"Daughter Habba, it is well to enjoy the beauties of nature and have communication with it but I have now become old and it will not be long when Yusuf will be called upon to rule the State, whose matters have become complicated. Yusuf must pay his attention to the affairs of the State and help me."

"What can I do, father?" asked Habba.

"Why, you have the understanding and intelligence and can make him know his duty to the State and its people. He will surely listen to you rather than to me. In fact, you should never mention to him what I have spoken to you."

"I hear and I obey," said Habba.

Yusuf again asked her to accompany him to his pleasure trips. Habba refused and told him that now it was no use honeymooning all the time. He must look to his legitimate duties of the State. This annoyed Yusuf and he became very angry. He left on one of his sojourns into the upper valleys of Kashmir, unaccompanied by his wife. He went beyond Pahalgam crossing rivers and hills and trying to forget his

wife. He had now become more volatile and actually he had never learned to control his mercureal nature. He reached a beautiful spot called Liderwat in the valley of Lider. Here he got a tent pitched under the high slate crags. The sides of the mountains were heavily covered with fir trees.

Although the place was picturesque and the beauty of nature abundant in its variety and luxuriance, yet Yusuf fell ill-at-ease and could not rest and enjoy in the absence of Habba. He wanted to see the tarns of Tarsar and Mansar, which stood very near to each other like two eyes of a fairy, but in the absence of Habba all was dust and ashes.

Habba Khatoon on her side was in great distress and anguish. It was a ripe autumn and she was staying in a far off valley; the sun, slowly sinking into its bed, tinged all Nature with the radiance of the departing glory. Mountains of irregular height, capped by forests of trees, stood out in bold relief against the red-dyed sky, and a number of small grey-stone farmers' cottages nestled amid the luxurious foliage on the slopes of the hills. Beneath all was a big stream, sweeping silently through the valley below, till, falling over a cluster of rocks, it was transferred into a cataract, the roar of whose waters broke in upon the stillness of eventide, and mingled with the lowing of the various herds being driven back to their farms.

Against the doorway of one of the small cottages, leant Habba Khatoon, shading her eyes from the radiant afterglow with a small, elegantly shaped hand. A soft silk of sombre hue enveloped her lissom figure and trailed on the grass at her feet. Among the peasants she was known as "Naznain", of whose beauty and proud cold manner they stood in awe. They did not know that she was Habba Khatoon. She had come among them at the commencement of autumn and furnishing the little cottage to suit her requirements, lived in a comparative seclusion with an old servant who accompanied her. She sighed, half impatiently, half sadly, as she sat on the little stone

seat in the verandah. As she did so the notes of Holy Quran, born by the breeze, fell upon her ears in fitful cadence. A group of peasants, carrying in their midst a tiny coffin was slowly going towards the graveyard. After the sad procession had passed, she came out on the road and encountered Mohamdoo, the palace post-boy, who delivered to her a couple of letters. She opened the letters. Inside the first was a small note and purely conventional smile parted her lips as she glanced at the writing; it was as follows:

> "My darling-where have you hidden yourself and why?
> Fair beloved, I remember the two tresses of yours,
> Tears flow from my eyes like Tarsar and Mansar."
>
> — Yusuf

The other note was in a feminine hand.

> Dearest Habba - Really you are an enigma. Prince Yusuf Shah's messengers haunt my house and it requires all my ingenuity to parry their enquiries regarding your retreat. I hope you are happy there. The prince certainly is not. Come back soon and meet him; for my sympathy now is all for him. Most incomprehensible of women! What more can your heart desire? You have beauty, wealth, fame and now a title lies at your feet.
>
> Always dearest, yours,
>
> Azizi

Habba Khatoon read the notes again. Beauty, wealth, fame! What have they brought her? Had they served to stay for an hour the passionate cry of her heart, the maddening longing for a child, which every woman craves for and without which life is incomplete?

The silence all around intensified her anguish. She paced the silent road and she felt that the loving presence of Yusuf alone could mitigate her agony. As she grew calmer she thought she must go to meet Yusuf and immediately left for Srinagar and then went to join him at Liderwat. When she saw

Yusuf she looked into his face. She was trembling violently and her features were lit with yearning tenderness. They remained long without a single utterance, for no words could reach the level of their condition. Yusuf's lips moved, as though to speak, but no sound came. With effort he said, "Where have you been?"

"To a far off village. I went there for rest, peace, outside the world, only dreaming of you. My life was getting on my nerves."

"Why so?"

"I sometimes fear that you will not love me like this always. Nothing can insure the continuance of your love. I feel full of fears that all this might evaporate as does water under the force of heat," replied Habba.

"You need not say such reckless things. Our affection will be eternal. Believe this, I cannot let myself lose you.

"I draw hope and comfort from your divinely beautiful eyes, Habba." As the words died on his lips he stooped for an instant as though shaken by passion and touched her forehead with his lips. Placing her arms round his neck, she whispered his name and he lowered his head till their lips met. A moment seemed an eternity. Then they sat for a long time talking. Habba had put her head near his breast.

"Now let us proceed to Tarsar," said Yusuf. They entered the ravine on the right near Liderwat and then hand in hand they came down a slope covered with rose bushes and other wild flowers. They went on the rough road to the lake which lay amidst mountains. Its water was transparent and blue in colour. It was shaped like the eye of a damsel and it was a magnificent sight to see the rising waves when gentle breezes blew over it. They took their meals there and then walked along the left bank of the lake and climbed a ridge from where they viewed the translucent lake.

They descended and walked along the shore of the lake. The wind gave rise to waves when the rays of the sun shone on it and the surface of the lake appeared studded with diamonds. The scene was sublime and fascinating. They returned by the left bank and after a few days arrived in Srinagar.

In Habba's company Yusuf could always be at ease, cosseted by her unswerving devotion. In turn Yusuf treated her with sympathy and generosity. Their life together was most harmonious and there was not even a slight touch of profligacy left in him since he married Habba. He had no longer any indecent desires. Thus with banquets in the gardens, listening to music and watching girls dancing at night time flew on gossamer wings.

Yusuf's fondness for Habba grew stronger while to her sorrow she remained childless. She occupied her time in studying his moods, soothing his cares and beguiling his leisure. Habba was a unique type of a woman. Although she was well aware of the power at her disposal she used it only when she was urged to intervene in some worthy cause. She never used her influence with Yusuf to commit an unkind act and she never accepted bribes. Even the nobles sought her help and very quickly she became popular among the people. She had her enemies, of course, but with her gentle manner she succeeded in deflecting their barbed shafts of jealousy and spite.

# 20

# *The Fury and Famine*

Ali Shah, the king of Kashmir, was an able and just ruler and looked after the welfare of peasants. The food was both abundant and cheap and prices of the articles of consumption astonishingly low. In Kashmir the Nature itself was the gardener, for many of the plots of ground on which the trees and vines flourished were uncultivated and uncared for. The Nature itself was beneficient to her for the people were good and virtuous.

But later on, as the wise among the people said, men became sinners and forgot the lessons of Lal Ded and Nund Rishi, the two great mystics of Kashmir who were long since dead.

It was the year 1578 A.D. One day black clouds gathered over the clear sky. They were dense and heavy. At first they appeared on the summit of the far off mountain but then spread over the whole valley. A strong wind lashed them and under its whip they became violent and furious. This violent wind uprooted the trees and even tore off the wooden roofs of some old houses.

Then the brightness of the sky turned into the darkness of the night. The people became terror-stricken and shut themselves up in their houses, fastening the windows and the doors.

Habba Khatoon sat alone in her apartment in an agony of fear and apprehension and remembered many a such day when she was forlorn and miserable and such topsy-turvyism of the natural elements was, strangely enough, a welcome relief to her inner fury but now the days had changed and she was happy, powerful and had got her relatives and favourites appointed to good posts. Her parents had come and settled once again in the city and wielded a lot of influence. Kesho Pandit was not forgotten and was given a prestigious job and was in the city and he used to come off and on to the palace to attend the meetings of the scholars and the wise men of the land.

The darkness had increased and the wind howled; Habba Khatoon's soul was full of Destiny's omnipotence.

Terror had descended upon the village of Chandhara. A flash of lightning rent the clouds and then there was a crash upon crash of thunder. All the people of the village were terrified with the demoniac power of the wind when it howled and broke the windows and the doors in some of the houses. They raised their hands in prayer: "*Ya Allah, Mercy!*"

As there was storm outside so there was storm inside the heart of Aziz Lone's mother. Since the time Aziz Lone had granted divorce to Habba Khatoon he drank profusely at Ramzan Bath's house and would sit idle and dozing and cursing.

That day Aziz Lone had not returned from his orgies. His mother surveyed the room, looked into the kitchen to make sure that her son was not there. Her heart grew as furious as the storm, for Aziz had made her life most miserable. He would roam about all the day and spend money like waste water and then come home dead drunk late at night and would quarrel with his mother and give vent to his pent up rage. He abused her profusely and held her responsible for all his ills.

The old woman then suddenly got up and left the house and rushed along in search of her son, oblivious of all the wind and storm. She did not look at any side but ran on. She stormed into Ramzan Bath's house at Pampore. She opened the door with a loud bang. Those in the room shuddered at the mad manner of the woman. She cast a hateful glance at them and went from one room to the other but she did not find her son there.

Then she came out at the threshold and waited for some time and raised her eyes and arms heavenwards and cried, "May this house be thrown into hell!"

Then she violently opened the outer gate and rushed on. Now poured into torrents rain mixed with snow, although it was early November and it hardly was the time for the snow-fall. The tempest seethed like a cauldron. The flood drenched her through and through but this could not deter her and she ran from house to house. She stopped nowhere, did not utter a word and ran in and rushed out like lightning. There was a demon inside her. The magical spell that she got cast by the astrologer on his son long back at Srinagar now boomranged on her with added force. It made her son lose reason and he was madly furious towards her. She would have killed him so was now her hatred for him.

Her search having failed she came back to her house. Her son was not there. She burst into wailing and then a wild cry as dreadful as the thunder came from her throat "May he be dead!" she uttered the curse. This echoed inside the house. She again rose up and dashed out. She was running on the road beyond Pampore. The road was strewn with leaves and big branches of trees that had been broken by the wind.

She was consumed by her inner storm and she ran till she fell down on some solid thing. There was a crash of thunder and she recognized her son, his dead body. All grew black before her and she got up, tore her hair and clothes and her

entire being quivered and she fell down and the waters carried them both to the river Jhelum, their watery grave.

Habba Khatoon was recollecting her past. Now she was at the height of luxury but she felt afraid of her very happiness and her heart was very heavy. It did not do in this life to be too fortunate. The Kashmiris generally believed that the air and the earth were filled with malignant spirits who could not endure the happiness of the mortals and hence in wicked ways brought about their destruction. There was an outburst of thunder and she trembled. She looked out and saw that the rain was endlessly pouring down from the heavens. There was no sound, save of water falling; no movement could be seen except the whirling flights of crows. Then Ghulam Ahmad Bhat, the Headman of Chandhara, was announced. She was, at first happy to see him but then pained to look at him for he was worn now to less than a shadow of a human creature. His eyes were brimming with tears.

"What is the matter with you?" enquired Habba Khatoon.

"Daughter, the rain and snow have played havoc in Chandhara. We had collected the harvest and it was lying in the fields waiting to be thrashed when the rains washed it away with demoniac force and not a grain was left. You know we rarely think of the future. "Sufficient for the day" is our practice and we believe that every calamity, even if it can be obviated with very little exertion, is our fate and the will of God and that we must bear resignedly under the circumstances and hope for better days to come. So nobody had stored anything for a rainy day. The fields now look like a vast ocean and we go about in boats and rafts. Many houses have tumbled down. There is no arrangement for charcoal and men are shivering with cold. The river Jhelum and many streams overflowed their banks. In oder to save the city the river Jhelum's banks and bunds up in the south of Kashmir have been cut off to make way for the overflowing water to pass into some villages. Many of them have thus got inundated causing

misery to the people who have been evacuated and kept in camps in the city."

At first his announcement was greeted with stunned silence by Habba Khatoon but then she burst out: "This is horrible. Oh! evil spirits are dogging me and want to torment and destroy me." She shook her head hopelessly in utter dismay and pain.

"There in the villages dogs are eaten and everywhere the horses and the fowls of every sort are stolen and eaten. In Chandhara men have eaten the beasts that ploughed the fields and the grass and the bark of the trees. What now remains for food?" said Bhat.

"But what can be done to the calamity of nature?", asked Habba.

"The people complain that the government is to be blamed for the supineness and carelessness in not providing against such an eventuality."

"But who could imagine this sudden calamity?"

Ghulam Ahmad also informed her about the death of Aziz Lone and his mother, whose dead bodies were to be seen nowhere. Tears rolled down the eyes of Habba Khatoon and she wept bitterly.

"Well, this is nemesis! We have sinned a lot and as we sow, so shall we reap," said Habba.

Habba Khatoon gave some money to Ghulam Ahmad Bhat and assured him that she would do what lay in her power to mitigate the suffering of her people. As soon as Ghulam Ahmad Bhat had left there were shouts, rising shouts of human voices, at first faint and then louder and louder till they filled the streets of Srinagar. Habba Khatoon rose up and half dazed she went at the window and saw there before the great iron gate a multitude of clamouring people pressing forward uttering tigerish howl. This mass of men and women had

been staring and were crying for bread. Then the king came out and assured them that every penny in the state treasury would be spent for removing their troubles. The government readily procured grains from some of the hoarders and opened public kitchens and distributed money and grains among the poor people.

It was with difficulty that the winter passed off and the water receded. Spring spread her mantle of green over the earth in the villages. Out to the hills and the lands went the poor to dig small green weeds and dandelions. The trees also thrust up feeble new leaves. In winter the people had been given food in charity by the government and remained silent, enduring stolidly the snow and ice and tried to forget the pangs of their agony and suffering by sleeping.

"That God is merciful," they began to doubt when the rains which should have come in early summer, withheld themselves, and day after day, the skies shone with fresh brilliance of the sun. From dawn to dawn there was not a cloud and all the rice dried up. Month passed into month and still no rain fell. As autumn approached the clouds gathered on the sky; they looked like mad elephants running helter skelter and the men in the streets, their faces upturned yearningly to the sky, prayed and prayed and their prayer was answered by the strong wind that would rise from the west and as if with a staff in hand, it would drive away with its full strength these elephant-like clouds and not a drop of rain would fall.

Ghulam Ahmad, the Headman, came to Habba Khatoon and whispered to her that in some villages cases of cannibalism were reported. A manufacturer of iron utensils killed a barber's boy for food and cooked the flesh.

"Yes, I also heard that an elephant died at the gate of the palace and many hungry people hurried and cut pieces of the meat from the carcass. I have also heard that the people

anxious to save their lives have left Kashmir and gone to other places in India."

"I realise now that it was one thing to have good intentions and another thing to carry them out. Yusuf Sahib was a pitiful and kind man, but idealists are not always practical. I feel that the rule of the Chaks will now end," she thought. Habba Khatoon was thus engrossed in her thoughts in the apartment when the king came bursting in on her.

"I had just left the palace when I saw a mob," he said. "They are coming from the city and are on their way to the Palace itself."

Habba Khatoon felt blood rushing to her face. The mob... marching on the Palace! Yusuf and Yakub were away and there was no one capable of sending them away. There was, of course, the king. He looked pale and resolute. "It is rebellion; I cannot tolerate when the people attack us," he said. "It requires prompt action."

Habba Khatoon said, "I shall deal with them. The people love us. We have our enemies but they are not the people."

The king nodded and again she realised by the way he looked at her that he was glad that she was there.

"Let them come in the courtyard, I will face the music," Habba Khatoon heard herself speaking. She said that she would speak to them and bravely stepped on the balcony when the people gathered in the courtyard of the Palace. There was a moment's silence and she said, "My good people, I am your daughter, Zoon."

"Mother Zoon, *zindabad*," cried the leader of the mob and was joined by others with the cry, "we want bread". Then dramatically she put off all her jewellery she was wearing and sent down to the leader. "Let every sister and mother do the same thing and you all will be saved. With the grace of Allah, the Almighty, conditions will improve. I shall also send money

for you. Don't lose your courage." There was a wild shout of triumph. Her action had a great effect on the people and they left dancing with joy. Thus she succeeded by her charm and magnetic personality in completely disarming the enemies of the Chaks who were inciting the people to create disturbances.

"Habba, you are simply wonderful. I am proud of you. You have dispersed the mob without throwing a single arrow," the king said to her and she saw the tears in his eyes. He was sad and depressed. There was a resolution about him. He had one purpose, to provide cheap rice to his people.

But the whole affair disturbed Habba Khatoon and she had a foreboding, as all pure souls have, that the independence of Kashmir was soon to come to an end. Habba Khatoon realised that there must be some plot. "It is not the people," she cried, "I shall not believe that it is the people. There are some nobles at the back of this whole turmoil," said Habba to the king.

"Yes, we send men to get grain from the neighbouring countries but they delay. God knows why? But I must stop this brigandage," declared the king. "But the people must not in any case suffer," said Habba Khatoon.

"All the hoarders must be arrested and the real culprits discovered and punished severely. In the meantime, I must send reliable men to see why there has been delay in the arrival of the grains," said the king.

The famine lasted for full three years and the king did a marvellous job in mitigating the suffering of the people. But one calamity was followed by another. There was a devastating fire which broke out in the northern quarters of Srinagar. The houses with their property and stores were completely gutted by the fire. Habba wept silently, the tears gathering in great knots of pain to her throat and rolling down her cheeks.

Ali Shah, the king, was heart-broken. He tried to dissuade his mind from depression by playing polo. But one day in the year of 1579 A.D. while playing the polo he fell down from the horse and got serious injuries. He was immediately brought to the palace and the royal Hakim began to treat him.

PART 5

# THE QUEEN OF KASHMIR

I gave myself up wholly to love
And pleased was God with me.

He who ramains firm in love
will get a taste of the wine,
Which fills the River of Life
That brought us here;
From whose water God has created
Every living creature

— *Khawaja Habib*

## 21

# *Long Live The King*

"It is said that the king's health is dwindling; is it so?" enquired Ghulam Ahmad Bhat, the Headman of Chandhara, from Habba, who often used to come to see her and give her his advice.

"Yes, he appears exhausted and very ill," replied Habba.

Ghulam Ahmad then put on his most confidential manner, which indicated that the matter was of utmost secrecy and importance.

"If it should happen soon...that Prince Yusuf Shah Sahib was called upon to rule, you should be careful. If you do not govern him, he would be governed by others, at least by his sons. You should realise the influence you can wield upon him," whispered Ghulam Ahmad.

"I ? But I know nothing about the affairs of the state!"

"Alas! that is not true. You are intelligent; only you allow yourself to be passive and dependent."

"But I can't!"

"You should learn to know and appreciate your strength."

It appeared that Ali Shah was coming to the end of his journey. Habba felt sad, for she had discovered that, for all his sensuality, Ali Shah was an extremely pious man. He felt sad for he would have liked to create a miracle and make Kashmir a land flowing with milk and honey. Habba longed to comfort him but could not. The king's own wife was much worried. She was apprehensive and continued to look as though the sky was about to fall upon her. Habba pitied her. She was more than beautiful; a woman of sensibility, understanding and great charm. Habba too would have liked to tell the king how much his kindness had meant to her.

"Ya Allah! guide us, protect us! We are too young to rule," she prayed silently.

In the palace grounds stood many chief citizens and the inmates of the palace. The condition of Ali Shah was critical. Within the main hall where the king lay, sat Yusuf Shah and his wives and near to the king, holding his head, was his favourite queen, Yusuf Shah's mother. There were other relatives and near and dear ones.

Outside Ali Shah's chamber stood Moulvies reciting sonorously, La illa Ha Ilailah, Mohamadu Rasul Ullah" (there is no God except Allah, Mohmad is His Messenger). They had been reciting the verses from Holy Quran unceasingly and that brought some solace to the king. The royal physician said, "I am helpless. The day is fixed by God."

Lying stretched on his bed, Ali Shah gave his final orders to the high nobles: "Do not grieve when I am dead; there would be disorder if you behave in sorrowful ways. Help the starving people." He summoned his ministers and nobles close to him and then he raised his voice:" I appoint my son, Yusuf Khan, as my successor. He must have in his hands absolute authority over the army and the civil affairs. You must all obey him utterly." One after the other the ministers and the nobles took oath to carry out his will.

After a while he said as if to himself, "I would like nothing except to see Habba Khatoon." She came nearer. She was grief-stricken and the king said to her, "I leave Yusuf to your care; always remain with him." Ali Shah accepted the end of his life calmly.

The low wailing of the men and women could be heard. Into the hall entered the Moulvis and cried, *Allah-ho-Akbar* (God is great).

Ali Shah's dead body was buried and Habba Khatoon felt that her hope of a peaceful life too had come to an end. The late king had confidence in her and respected her for he thought that Yusuf was unwise. Ali Shah was kind and humane in disposition. He was a forgiving king; he forgave his son Yusuf when he rebelled against him in his earlier time. Habba Khatoon wept bitterly. The last rites concerning the death of Ali Shah Chak had not been performed yet when Yusuf's uncle, Abdal Chak, held his claim for the throne. The issue was fought at Nowhatta, where Abdal Chak was defeated and killed.

Thus Yusuf Shah declared himself king in 1579 A.D. with the title of Nasir-ud-Din Mohammad Yusuf Badshah Ghazi. Many nobles and their ladies and others came to congratulate Habba. She was quiet and pensive. They looked at each other with concern. She felt that they thought she had gone out of her mind. Actually, she was thinking about the future and about the enemies within and enemies without. While the ladies were still with Habba Khatoon Yusuf entered with that fascinating smile of his which meant everything to her. She was wearing a black satin dress when a golden casket was brought and handed over to him. He opened its lid and brought out a diadem made of gold and studdded with diamonds and pearls and put it on the head of Habba. Every one present deeply courtesied and congratulated her. Then Moulvis entered the room and recited the Holy Quran. Habba Khatoon was embarrassed as she was overwhelmed when

Yusuf said, "We belong to each other in the sun and the storm. "Habba, in spite of herself, made an effort and was able to say, "I thank Your Majesty; I shall try to be a good wife."

In the evening when Habba Khatoon was lying flat on her bed and closed her eyes, she felt her body was floating upto the ceiling and then floating on waves on the Pampore fields and the village of Chandhara, seeing everything and hearing everything and then returned and laid herself on bed.

But soon after two months of joy and pleasure Yusuf was no longer in control of the situation. One day Habba buttonholed him and he confessed to her that he was in great trouble.

After the death of Abdal Chak, Saiyid Mubarak Khan came out as the strongest and the most influential leader. This thought went to his head and he began to plot of getting the throne for himself.

"Under the circumstances, Habba, war is inevitable but if anything bad happens, you must live with your parents till the rebellion is put down." Habba could say nothing, only big teardrops fell down from her eyes.

Yusuf was defeated by Saiyid Mubarak Khan at the field of Idgah in Srinagar and Yusuf had to flee the country for safety. Thus Saiyid Mubarak occupied the throne in 1579 A.D. But he antagonised the people who revolted against him under the leadership of Lohar Chak. Just after a rule of one month and a half he abdicated in favour of Lohar Chak. Habba Khatoon was practically in hiding. She had a foreboding that the day would no longer come when treasures would, as before, drop into her lap like gifts from God. She spent her days of separation by writing poems full of sorrow. One such was: .

All my sorrows will vanish if you call on me
Love, I will lay down my life for you.

A sumptuous feast and delicious drinks
I have kept ready for you.

I will crown you with sweet garlands;
My silvery self I will scour with cream;
I am uneasy and pining for you;
I will bathe in water of sandal-wood fragrance;
My Love, I will lay down my life for you.

Like the moon sinking down the ridge
I stagger while my heart sinks in despair.
Where comfortably, unconcerned are you asleep?
Come, I will lay down my life for you!

The cat is ready to pounce on the bird
So is Death in wait for a mortal.
Come, I have surrendered all to you;
My Love, I will lay down my life for you!

What great horror made you flee from home?
And you did not rest even for a night.
Habba Khatoon has ventured thus to say.
My Love, I will sacrifice all for you!

Yusuf Shah was not a coward and when he chose he could become dynamic and show a strong resolve. He straightway went to Fatehpur Sikri and paid his homage to Akbar on 3rd January, 1580 A.D. and sought his help. Akbar ordered Raja Man Singh and Mirza Yusuf Khan to march on Kashmir and instal Yusuf Shah on the throne. At Lahore Man Singh's attitude was somewhat hesitating and disinteresting, so Yusuf slipped from the Mughals and joined his Kashmiri followers led by his former minister Moh'd Bhat, waiting for him in Lahore.

In the meantime, Lohar Chak and his followers were alarmed on hearing that Yusuf Shah was coming with a large Mughal army. They offered him the throne on the condition that he would not enter Kashmir with the Mughal army. He accepted the proposal. However when he reached Sopore on November 8, 1581 A.D., he was confronted by Lohar Chak but he was defeated and taken as a prisoner along with his chief followers. Thus Yusuf again became the king.

Yusuf Shah aimed to rule peacefully and so consolidated his position and intimidated his enemies. He gouged out the eyes of Lohar Chak, impaled and threw him into the prison along with his followers. He abolished the cruel taxes and put down the revolts in the valley with an iron hand.

Habba Khatoon came out from her hiding and joined her husband in the palace. Although she was pleased to find her lord back in Srinagar but she got fearful, for he had made the position of Raja Man Singh awkward before Akbar in not employing the Mughal army in the recovery of his throne and its consequences would be severe and fraught with danger. Raja Man Singh got enraged of Yusuf and he kept Haider Chak, one of the enemies of Yusuf Chak, with him. Haider Chak had taken refuge with him and had been assigned the jagirs of Bhimber and Naushara and was kept as a pawn to promote the imperial interests in Kashmir. Therefore, to neutralise the intrigues of Haider Chak, Yusuf Shah deputed one Khawaja Qasim to Lahore but he returned unsuccessful.

Now Habba Khatoon started her active life; she would not remain idle like the other queens of Yusuf. Early morning a bundle of petitions came to her from the poor who could not marry off their daughters. They sought her help. Habba herself studied these applications. She was moved to pity at the sight of suffering and misery. Seldom was a distressed person refused charity. Each day large amounts of money, clothes and jewellery were given to the people. Habba Khatoon loved to be of service to her own people; she considered it a good fortune to be in a position to help the distressed girls or help the poor and needy. She used to plead often with Yusuf on behalf of the people who had incurred his displeasure. Many a time she sought pardon for political offenders.

Habba didn't fade between the screens of harem life. As was well known, she was proficient in music, dancing, calligraphy and poetry. She hunted on a horseback. Although she retained all her calmness in the face of danger and was not

unnerved but she had tendency for pathos and sadness which was reflected in her song and verse.

She was fond of fashion and interior decoration and was dexterous in designing ornaments and dresse. with the help of her tailors. Day by day Yusuf loved an easy and care-free life and allowed her to give orders. He found her wise and sought her advice. The love and concord of Yusuf and Habba were as close as two nut-kernels in one shell.

# 22

# *Bagh-i-Yusuf*

The outcome of the conjunction of the character of the Sultans and the genial climate of the period was the growth of the arts. The people loved poetry and the poets sprang up, the people loved music and dancing and musicians and dancers of eminence emerged. And in the beauty spots the king Yusuf Shah and the nobles held dancing parties where sang the fairest of the fairies.

Yusuf Shah, bored with the feudal arrogance of the women in the Palace, was deeply impressed by Habba's air of natural cultured elegance. She was not awed by the high social standing of the women or even the men she came into contact. Barring some, they eulogised her good behaviour and they were effusively kind to her. Her tastes for fine arts coincided with those of her husband, who would always keep her at his side.

The queens and other women of the nobility disapproved of the laxity of the Kashmiri court and they tried to hedge themselves in behind a wall of protocol and propriety and did not come out of the *Zenana* to participate in any of the king's amusements, but not Habba Khatoon. Although she maintained *purdah* but with an appetite for life, she was always with

Yusuf in hunting, excursions, picnics and in musical and dancing parties for which he had great passion.

It was the season of spring and the day of the *Jashan-i-Shagufa*, the festival of flowers. The Muslim rulers, especially Zain-ul-Abidin and Yusuf Shah, laid many gardens and constructed many buildings but due to the vandalism of the Chaks and the Bambas and other marauders and bad characters the buildings were burnt and gardens destroyed. Now on this day the nobles and amirs were invited to a musical and dancing party in the Bagh-i-Yusuf where fragrant breezes blew all the time. The guests were admitted and they began to mingle with each other and chat and talk with each other in groups. The women dallied and watched the graceful spray of fountains. Then they were led the way to a large awning or an open tent with side walls enclosing the three sides of a portion of the lawn. The ground below the awning was provided with settees and cushions and covered with rugs from Persia and Bokhara. At the back were ladies behind the thin curtains. On the sides were waiting attendants with a variety of cooling *sharbat*, of many a fragrance, samovars of boiling tea and brass trays piled with fruits. And while the bearers served the refreshments there glided on the carpet Azizan, the beautiful dancer of Srinagar whom Yusuf had rewarded generously and who, in her turn, provided for his entertainment the best of her profession whenever her master needed.

To be born of a long line of dancers of purely matriarchal descent for so many generations that all count is lost, is to have every nerve and muscle and indeed every instinct of the body working to every inspiration of the dance of intuition. When a dancer is endowed with personal grace and beauty, it is to be imagined that she is likely to be of an influence of no small measure in the circles in which she moved. In the eyes of the Kashmiri world the beautiful dancer lives without soul, without caste, without religion, a thing of beauty, a plaything, a useful instrument, a mistress but by no possible stretch of imagination or play of feeling could she be given a status.

Out of this vista of dancing female ancestors, the beautiful Azizan had sprung and had early been trained in her profession. She had cast coils over many of the young nobles of the valley, among whom to maintain a dancing girl was quite the most fashionable thing to do. The power and wealth of Yusuf Shah had made her his for so long as he pleased, or she intended, so long as she pleased, and her influence was considerable. It is one of the curiosities of Kashmir's history that the wholly worthless dancing girl, void of all religious or moral teaching, wholly a parasite of evil, should become the most influential adviser of a ruler. Disowned and ignored by respectable women of the *Zenana* they have flourished ephemerally as the red agarie in the shade of an autumn wood.

Azizan danced exquisitely as well as ruled wisely, and knew where her frontiers ran, and where lay foreign land. And while she danced, she also kept her professional eye open, and had secured as disciplined following the best of the coming dancers in Kashmir. Their training had been perfected under her own eyes and had arranged that they should dance for his supporters on those velvety lawns in the Bagh-i-Yusuf.

So, as the *sharbats* circulated, Azizan and her maids glided on to carpets and stood jingling their ankle bells before the admiring nobles. And with them came the makers of sweet music, retainers of Azizan also, chosen for their understanding of the more languid and amorous tones of the pipe and sitar. Three of them shuffled up behind the *paries*, the man with the *dole* or tom-tom leading, a grey-bearded habitue' of the court of Kashmir, well practised to throb the drum exactly when most effective. The other two were younger musicians, the piper with ragged unkempt beard and a black reed pipe, the man with a sitar clean shaven with eyes deeply lined with cosmetic or vacuous unclean leer. Wholly unclean, wholly lecherous and loathesome all the three, but permissible in that they understood their art to perfection. And that art was the making

of haunting seductive amorous music that all the world, for its sins, could understand.

They commenced one of those swaying insinuating *nautches*, which to the Kashmiris are fraught with all the love and passion and high drawn suggestion that ever a Persian poet dreamed of. And the dance told a story, commencing with the loneliness of a young captain ever condemned to be a frontier guard, longing for the scented delights of the city bazaar. And ever his desire grows and the dreary rocks of the frontier pall, till some errand leads him citywards to woo some beauty and beneath whose verandah he sings in vain. And then despair and desire seize him, when lo! a rival appears and casts a lure, at first unheeded yet ever more attractive till at last the lover begins to feel the spell of the entrancing charmer. Then as the fire leaps to new fuel, the inclination of the absconding soldier becomes fierce and ever more ardent, and the charmer ever more compelling, till he gives himself body and soul to the personified goddess.

The dancers elaborately and sinuously dance their interpretation of the story, now swaying slowly with closed and balanced arms, as the despair of the captain is depicted, changing to the motion of a hurrying serpent, and the violence of love defeated. Claw go the castanetes, and loud throbs the doe and the despair is greater than the slow insinuating motions of the new enchantress. Even the sapielman pipes and the sitar twangs, and you can see every muscle under the soft olive skin and transparent muslins of the girls. Azizan leads the motion as fugleman, with arms and ankle and bosom moving to the pipe in softness and in frenzy.

That it is high class performance is evident in the intense gaze of the onlookers, and the low sounds of approbation. Azizan was undoubtedly the artist of the very first grade, with a figure and grace beyond comparison. And of all those who looked and admired not one could have given birth to a thought that this beautiful and graceful creature was in any

sort a human being which had any claim to any of the ordinary heritage of the human race. Any existence beyond that of a butterfly was absolutely denied to her in the opinion of each and all, from the greatest to lowest in Kashmir.

With a clap of Azizan's hands the music ceased, the girls glided away and the musicians shuffled after them, before the audience could realise what it was all about, or give out vent to the chorus of *Wah*! *Wah*!.

With the conclusion of the *nautch*, it was obviously time to go, and the guests hastened to take their leave, whispering assurances of their loyalty to the king.

It is a fatal thing when a ruler belongs to a different sect or religion from that of the majority of his subjects. Yusuf was the Shia while the majority was the Sunni and the corrupt nobility seized upon any or every occasion to create riots and evil strife and no sooner did Yusuf ascend the throne than dissension and discord raised its head. Yusuf did his best to suppress the strifes but he thought it necessary to keep the aristocracy and the nobles in good humour by inviting them to dinner and dancing parties and giving them gifts. He was always in favour of truce with his nobles. The reception after Habba's wedding in the Bagh-i-Yusuf was instinct with friendliness towards Yusuf and pleasure at Habba's marriage with Yusuf. This established a lot of harmony between the sovereign prince and the people of distraught land.

Yusuf had not to worry about the Hindus. They were a minority. All the same, he was not harsh towards them. Yusuf was not thought to be as a cloak-and-dagger hero but he had the virtue of patience. He was essentially a romantic man and a poet.

The Sunnis, of course, were a potential danger to the Chak ruler if Yusuf ran counter to the will of the Sunni nobles. So he often invited them to parties to ascertain from them what really happened in the country and to take the necessary steps

with their help. They were personages of outstanding qualities who could be an inestimable boon in his resistance against Akbar, the Mughal Emperor. They would be of colossal danger if he became their adversary.

But the people began to feel that something joyful and romantic, a ray of beauty had come like sunshine into the gloomy land with the wedding of Yusuf with a sparkling peasant girl. Their admiration was quickly captured by Habba, as she had risen from their stock. Then she loved poetry and music of their own kind. Thus the romantic figure of Habba shone triumphantly on her throne besides Yusuf Shah.

# 23

# *The World of Courtesans*

It was said that the times of Chaks were, though not wholly true, a period of immorality and it was rumoured that Yusuf Shah sped butterfly-like from woman to woman. Undoubtedly, in Srinagar there were courtesans who occupied irregular positions. There were prostitutes who possessed an exclusive and aristocratic clientele. They were kept by some of the great nobles of the land. They dressed magnificently, occupied handsomely furnished lodgings and often had their own *shikaras* to go about. Each of them got clothes, jewellery and generous allowance, a serving woman and a male servant. They wielded a lot of influence as they exacted political and other information from their lovers, who were highly placed civil and military officers, and passed it on to the nobles who acted as agents of the Imperial Government at Agra. The king and the common people were most secular-minded and it was these nobles with vested interests who created different factions and feuds between the Shias and the Sunnis or the Hindus and the Muslims. This was almost always the case in the history of Kashmir.

One such noble was Naseer Khan, who was a dissolute and unprincipled man, brought up in the early decaying court of some neighbouring chieftain and spared, when opportunity

offered, none who crossed his path. He was, morever, good at intrigue and like many of his kind, often over-reached himself. His agents of intrigue were many and none more influential and shrewder than the lady who was styling herself Begum Naseem Jan who belonged to what has been called the oldest profession in the world. She was in demand at musical concerts and dancing festivals. Chieftains and nobles vied with each other in patronizing her and showering valuable gifts over her. Her apartments were always crowded with wealthy men seeking pleasure. She dwelt, after the manner of her kind, in a house by the city wall, near the river Jhelum. Her upper room contained a long latticed balcony from which the habitues could smoke their *huka* and scan the busy life of the river and also on those who came and went to and from the Palace. Those who frequented the salon of Begum Naseem Jan were usually the gallants of the royal court, captains of the army and the barons of the suburbs. Gossip of the better type was always to be had at the time of morning audience, better, that is to say, so far as interest went, but in little else. Gossip is always evil and gossip in the interior of a Kashmiri courtesan's residence would hardly be any high. But, it had the spice which surrounds the doings of the princes and nobles and a value of its own to those who could sift the chaff from the grain. So thought Naseer Khan, who lay at ease on a crimson divan in a dark corner of the Begum's inner reception room, and listened while the astute lady conversed with her morning visitors. The gossip ran on Yusuf's garden parties and the politics of the Palace, particularly the estranged relations between Yusuf and Yakub, his son, who were at loggerheads. Yakub had a dislike for Habba also. After a while the company thinned out till only two Mughals were left chatting with the Begum. One lay comfortably on a Bokhara rug while the other sat on a wicker stool and both were smoking rose-water *hukas*. They began to talk secrets. The Begum lay back on her cushions and the Mughal visitors commenced:

"Our lord sends you greetings. Now this is the message for you. Some of the devoted barons should create factional riots in a way that the blame is laid on Yusuf Shah Chak. Then the complaints against him should be brought vehemently to the notice of the learned Yakub Sarfi Sahib and other learned men and leaders who would present themselves before the Emperor and urge him to attack Kashmir."

"The words of the great Khan are a law unto me, his servant but this is a difficult matter, full of complications. This humble one may well lose all and her life too."

"The great Khan also bade us to say that when Kashmir is fully annexed by us she will be well rewarded."

"The great Khan," said the lady, "is believed as ever, and it is true that what I ask my men to do they will not refuse."

"By his command now I invest you with this gold and diamond chain."

And here the envoy hung round the neck of the courtesan a chain of gold and diamonds with an emerald pendant. That type of ornament, well known in the harems of the north, was modelled on the necklaces of Iran. Her eyes glistened with desire and she gave her alluring smile and said:

"Convey my gratefulness to the great Khan. I shall do whatever I can."

The sound of *rabaab* drifted through the sunny room of the courtesan's apartments, the notes as delicate and clear as fountain water. The two Mughal envoys were led to a big hall where there were present dainty dancers, dressed in different colours, like the butterflies. Already there were assembled other guests. Naseem Jan signalled to one of the dancers and she got up. She danced as in a dream. Her beauty and vigorous movements, corresponding to the rhythm of music, made the dance a melodious phantasy. Khadiji, that was the dancer's name, danced so passionately that they were all in an

exhilarating ecstasy. The guests were being served the saffron-wine by the other graceful dancers. After the dancing another pretty girl began to sing a Persian song. She looked like some heavenly *houri*. Although the Mughal envoys' hearts were filled with rapture and they were magnetized by the damsel they had to extricate themselves from the assembly.

And then the Mughal envoys rose to go feeling that the less said now the better, lest the lady should repent of her undertaking, or ask for more earnest money after the manner of her kind.

It was her familiarity of history of the valley gained by experience and her view of what did or did not make a good ruler that enabled well-equipped Naseem Jan to acquire some amount of backstage influence.

But with some larger outlook than those who counted on their curry and the jewels they could extricate from their admirers the prosperity of the valley and of the dwellers of the city, was a matter on which she was wont to ponder.

"The race is not always to the swift," thought Naseem Jan and she acted slowly and surely and dexterously. To each lover individually she bade to create fuss and make the Sunnies and the Shias to fight.

Apart from Naseem Jan, who was a mistress in the echelons of power and possessed a captivating glamour, there were other prostitues who did not exert a hypnotic fascination for men, but, nevertheless, they had beauty and youth enough and exercised influence over their paramours. They inhabited in a separate mohalla known as "Tashawan". These women were kept by rich traders in proper style. They had perfect manners and social graces and youngmen of the rich class were sent to them to learn the *"adab-i-mahfil"*, the manners of assembly. They could recite Persian poetry and show them how to talk over a goblet of wine. They also taught them how to dress and how to converse in a polite society or a royal

court. They were trained women. There were some crude prostitues who catered to the sexual needs of the ruffians and these women were cruel. They were also paid by the feudal agents who fished in the troubled waters. Those lords were interested in keeping the king weak and engaged in the suppression of the quarrels and riots.

Habba Khatoon had heard about the deplorable condition of these prostitutes, how their matrons fleeced them of every penny they earned and they suffered from horrible diseases and were thrown away as a worn out shoe is thrown away on a dung-hill, when they were too old enough for their profession. They died a miserable death. "The cries of these unfortunate women impel me to come to their succour. We cannot be unfeeling to their misery," complained Habba Khatoon to the king.

"But this system of prostitution cannot altogether be stopped in Kashmir," said Yusuf.

"Why not?"

"This horrible system is a necessary evil. The prostitutes are a dustbin of the society and to clean it the prostitutes are badly needed. Not all the prostitutes suffer and all are not so bad as you imagine. There are many dejected people; there are those who are rejected by the respectable ladies and then there are those who are ill-treated by their wives. They find a brief but complete forgetfulness in the arms of the prostitutes and thereby make up for the scorn of the girls of good society. They get the rapture of pure eroticism uncomplicated by the romantic pretence. Had you known Mukhta, you would have seen what an apostle of sympathy and kindness she was. She was respectable even though she was an amorous woman. Let them remain; we will see that their conditions of living were improved and they were not ill-treated by their masters."

Thus Yusuf Shah immediately appointed officers who got them periodically checked by physicians and who got medical

aid. In fact all of them were registered by the government and it was seen that they were not made victims of their matrons' cruelties.

## 24

# *Moonstruck Lover*

A cool and pleasant August rain fell over Srinagar and the young and handsome overseer suspended his work in the "Yusuf Bagh" and to escape from getting drenched he sat on green turf under an apple tree. He didn't think that anybody had spotted him there gazing in amazement at the lordly house. The youngman was a dreamy sort of a person and he pictured how the inmates of the house must be living. He sighed! His own life was one of labour and boredom. The rain had stopped but the man was still lost in reverie, wondering at the windows of the house which were of light green colour in wooden frames of cherry red colour and there were red curtains hanging before each window. Suddely the silk curtain in front of one of the windows moved and he beheld an unexpected vision. The woman who looked out of the window, dressed in pink and blue, he thought, was a virtual fairy and the youngman was enchanted. It was Habba Khatoon who saw him and immediately withdrew. The man was left to wait through long hours in vain to see her again. When the shades of evening began to fall he left for home with his wounded heart.

"Your spirit is broken, Gaffara," said his wife. She set the evening meal before him but he would eat nothing. When his

wife, who loved him immensely, questioned him he said, "The morning meal is still heavy on my stomach and a night's rest will set me right and tomorrow I shall eat as usual."

His wife prepared his bed immediately and Gaffara began to think of the magnificent beauty that he had seen at the window. He forgot his sleep; desire buzzed in his head until he was ill and tossed from side to side in high fever. His wife who lay by his side enquired of him the reason for his suffering. "I am hot with fever and have mental restlessness," replied her husband.

Early next morning his wife sent a man to fetch a competent *hakim*. The *hakim* arrived and took the patient's hand and began to feel his pulse. Then he laid his ear on his heart and heard its beats. He found a beat or two missing and soon diagnosed the malady. The *hakim* laughed and laughed till his sides ached. "What makes you laugh?" enquired the woman. "Great lady, the patient has intensely fallen in love and if his longing is not satisfied he will in due course of time, languish."

The woman thought that the *hakim* was joking but the latter assured her on oath that he was speaking truth. The *hakim* took his fees and without speaking a word more he left the house.

"Tell me who is the cause of your disease?" Gaffara's wife asked him but he would not tell her. She had to cajole and persuade him for a long time and then tears rolled from his eyes and he mustered courage to say," I shall hide my trouble from my wife no longer." He then related the episode to her in full detail. "The *hakim* is correct; my heart is sick. There is no pleasure in living," said Gaffara. He could not realise that even to see the queen was impracticable.

Zubeda was dozing on a window seat, her embroidery half slipping off her lap; it was her duty to undress the queen and remain with her till the lamps in the bed-chamber were

blown out. Zubeda was the queen's friend and neighbour in her earlier days and she had been placed in her personal service. Zubeda felt tired; she was no longer a small young girl and her life since she was appointed as Maid of Honour to Habba Khatoon hadn't been an easy one. She was her eyes and ears and had remained loyal to her royal mistress as best as she could. But lately she was stricken with sorrow.

Habba Khatoon came to her and just shook her. She got up yawning. Her mistress was undressed, her hair flowing down her shoulders and she stood with the heart-shaped stone in her open palm and the bright glitter of the diamonds round it sparkled.

"I am sorry, my *maalkin*, I just felt weak," said Zubeda.

"No Zubeda, now-a-days you seem to be ill and sad and languishing. What is the trouble with you? Is everybody at home well?"

"Yes Malkin, I am well and so is everyone at home well."

"Zubeda, you had an excellent disposition, a character of gold, always merry, good natured, ready for jest, witty, full of pranks, never melancholy. Your looks now conceal a secret grief, which I would try to mitigate. You avoid speaking and answer in fewest possible words."

"Malkin, my tongue burns to tell you my grief."

"In the name of Allah tell me, who is holding you as my dearest sister. I will sacrifice anything for you."

"My husband, my husband-husband," she faltered to speak.

"Yes, your husband?"

"He had a glimpse of your face and was enchanted. He is on his death bed. No medicine can help him, so says the *hakim* and only you—you, rest you can understand."

On hearing it the queen sat down to think for quite some time. Then she smiled and whispered to Zubeda her scheme of curing her husband.

"You should tell him a fib. You should tell him that I also like him much and esteem him greatly for his love of me. Habba told her that Zubeda's husband would be admitted in one of the palace chambers through the secret door late at night. Then Zubeda would wear the queen's own costume and ornaments and use her perfumes and other cosmetics. But her husband should be told that just before the entrance of Habba Khatoon, that is his wife in disguise, the lights would be extinguished and neither he nor she sould speak a word to each other. Before dawn, when it would be still dark, he must leave the palace quietly like a mouse through the same door."

Zubeda was happy and told her husband that he would enter the palace chamber of Habba Khatoon by the secret backdoor and sleep with her for the night. No voice should be heard and the lights would be off. He should not speak a word of it to anybody or else his head would be chopped off.

Habba Khatoon also apprised Yusuf Shah about the matter and sought his permission for the execution of her plan of treatment for the lovesick man. He admired her intelligence and approved the scheme.

On the appointed day Zubeda had a warm bath in which rose-scent had been put. She put on a dress of pale blue satin silk beautifully embroidered and had a *loongi* (a strip of cloth) tied round her waist to emphasise her small waist and hint at the full breasts. A single eagret plume was fastened to her black hair by a brooch of sapphire and she wore a necklace of the pale blue stones as large as pebbles round her neck. She looked a woman of astonishing beauty, voluptuous in body, with dazzling white skin, smooth rounded arms ending in lovely hands that glittered with diamonds and a charming face in a mass of gleaming dark hair.

When it was quite dark another lady-in-waiting, Noora Begum, was woken by a boy-servant. The servant bowed and handed her a folded slip of paper with Yusuf's seal stamped on it. Noora got up and took the note and read it. There was a door in one of the palace chambers which opened into a secret passage and out of the palace. This door had been kept locked and she was in charge of its key. No one used that entrance. Noora was instructed to unlock the door at late evening and make sure that he who entered it was not disturbed during the night. A gentleman, too exalted to name, intended to make use of the passage. The note was signed by the king, Yusuf Shah, and seal affixed on it.

Late at night Zubeda's husband was conducted into the room by the secret door. He beheld himself in a chamber whose walls were covered with murals and the ceiling of azure colour and curtains of embroidered silk were hanging before the door and windows and he could see the vases of silver and glazed earthenrware of exquisite beauty and carpets of Bokhara spread on the floor. There were lighted oil lamps and a sprightly young woman was in attendance. And shortly after the maiden brought him a basin and an ewer of silver. She poured the water and he performed ablution. Then she brought him a magnificent dress and shoes and left. He changed the clothes and sat on the royal couch.

The soft sound of a rabaab drifted in the magnificent rooms of the apartment; the notes were sweet and delicate. Then a cloth of yellow colour was spread before him and the girl brought in different dishes containing rich viands. There was saltish *pillav* and sweet *pillav, rogen josh, yakhni, gushtaba, biryani, rista* and *harisa* and meats and vegetables of different varieties. Then the girl filled him a goblet of wine and he took it from her and drank it in one draught. Then Gaffara ate his food. After he had eaten, the girl carried away the dishes and took off the *dastar-khana*. Then she softly played on the sarangi while Gaffara reclined.

After sometime the maid stopped and extinguished the lamps. "Now I take your leave, jinab; not a murmur should be heard any more. That is the order."

"You may gladly depart now," said Gaffara.

Gaffara got into the bed and he was lying in total darkness. There was no way of knowing how much time had passed when he heard the creak of the other door in the side-wall opening. It might have been a few minutes or an hour after the female attendant had left him. He lay with his eyes shut listening to the sound of someone moving across the floor. The whole room was filled with perfume. He opened the eyes and he could see faintly the silhouette of a beautiful form in exquisitely beautiful attire and sparkling diamonds and pearls. Waves of gratitude passed through his mind as he felt the presence of the splendid figure. Then there was all the mingling of joy and passion!

The same thing was repeated for two more consecutive nights and then Gaffara was completely cured of his lovesickness and he recouped his health. He rested at home and was delirious with joy. Then one day his wife told him that it was she and not Habba Khatoon who had slept with him in the palace. It enraged him first and then he felt ashamed and repentance and remorse to know that the object of his timid and foolish fantasies was but his own wife and that he poured all his devotion to his own wife who appeared a heavenly beauty. Gaffara was having a terrible mental struggle and his youthful enthusiasm had evaporated. Habba Khatoon had given him a complete shaking to his mind and soul.

He cut himself off completely from the world and prayed. Then he went to Sheikh Masud and joined his order of the holy men. He devoted the rest of his life in the service and devotion of God alone. He composed hymns and verses in praise of God and his Prophet which were popular in no time. Habba Khatoon won his gratitude; she had saved his life and household from utter ruin.

The people were astonished at his sudden cataclysm and thronged to him for his blessings.

When Yusuf heard the outcome of this whole drama he congratulated Habba saying, "I am proud to have made you my favourite queen. Ah! you are every inch a queen and a woman of great character."

"My master, you also need some treatment for your love-sickness."

"My love is not a disease. It is an elixir of life. It is not sensuous love tempted by carnal desire; it is mundane love leading to a spiritual one. A Sufi *darvesh* whom I met at Crar-i-Sherif, soon after my marriage with you, told me that each man or woman had his or her true counterpart-a "soul-mate"-either in this life or some other." You are my "soul-mate" and you reign supreme in my affection," said Yusuf at length.

"Now, my lord, no sermon for me. Well, I am not a saint of self denial. Youth comes once in life and nobody can bring back the withered fallen petals of the rose of youth to freshness."

Then she laughed.

"Why not exorcise your own devil of love also?" asked Yusuf.

"It is an angelic love and no Satan can tempt the woman in me."

There was heard the call of Muizan for *nimaz* and they got up to perform the prayers.

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# 25

# *Two Venerated Men*

One warm evening, Sultan Yusuf Shah was sitting on a diwan, smoking his hookah after his usual afternoon siesta. From time to time he sipped some strong tea which Habba Khatoon poured out for him. He was melancholy and in deep thought.

"What is the matter? You seem to be worried, my *Sartaj*," enquired Habba Khatoon.

The king, taking his pipe out of his mouth, said, "In Kashmir, where intrigue and conspiracy lurks everywhere men spread false rumours about me."

"What do they say?"

"It is said that I was engrossed in the pleasures of youth and neglected the affairs of the country. Life to me, it is rumoured, was a merry-go-round of pleasures and more pleasures. Similarly, you are the subject of hundred whispers."

"Don't bother, spreading false and unfounded rumours to discredit the men in power has ever been the first weapon in the armoury of the malicious in Kashmir," said Habba.

"No doubt, Kashmir is wrapt in gloom. There are fights in the streets. The flames of internecine quarrels in Kashmir, it has been reported to me, burns the hearts of the venerated men

like Yakub Sarfi and Baba Daud Khaki. Actually, it is the agents of the Mughal Government who create these troubles. All the same, I do my best to suppress the riots."

"Well, leave all this worry, think of something else. Who is this Yakub Sarfi. I had a glimpse of him when long ago I was invited to the poetic symposium in the palace. They say he is a genius and spiritual guide of our time."

The king said, "I have been told that Yakub Sarfi was yet a child when he committed the whole of the Holy Quran to memory and wrote poetry at the age of seven. He studied under Mulla `Aini, when the latter was in Kashmir. Yakub's next teacher was Mulla Basil Khan Khandabhavani. Thereafter, he received his education in Sialkot, Lahore, Kabul, Samarkand, Mashan, Mecca, Medina etc. Yakub became the spiritual successor of Sheikh Hussain of Khurasan in Turkish land. He also received from the renowned Sheikh Ibn Hajar Makhi, the great teacher of Hadith at Mecca, the necessary *Ijazat* or licence to give instructions in the traditions of the Prophet. Yakub has written sublime and beautiful works and completed a Khamsa."

Habba Khatoon widened her eyes in awe and wonder and said, "But you never invite such a great poet to the court? Why so?"

"He doesn't like your poetry, which appears to him trivial and puerile. He is a great favourite of Shah-in-Shah Akbar, the Mughal Emperor, and has respectfully been admitted in his austere society. By the time he returned to Kashmir, he had many followers and devotees in Hindustan. At his house near Zaina Kadal in Srinagar collect men of letters and his religious disciples and followers and to them he says that religious piety and morality has dwindled in Kashmir. He has turned anti-Chak and blames you and me for the present state of Kashmir's degradation."

"What does he precisely say?" enquired Habba Khatoon.

"I have been informed that Sarfi laments that Kashmir was a garden of saints and Rishis and it has now turned a desert of devils because of the Chak rule. He exhorts them to give up sectarian and communal frenzy and believe in the brotherhood of man in the real sense of the word."

"That is right but why should he hold us responsible for the communal troubles?"

While Yusuf and Habba Khatoon were thus talking, lo and behold! Yakub Sarfi was announced and was immediately ushered in the chamber of Yusuf Shah where Habba too remained. Sarfi, Habba saw, was of middle height, plump and healthy and clad in the robes of the Sheikhs of Arabia and Iran. He had an impressive beard which was turning grey and his eyes were deep set and penetrating. His forehead was broad and his eye-brows bushy. He had a pashmina shawl of white colour thrown around his shoulders. His feet were clad in leather shoes and his gait was erect and commdanding.

Sarfi put off his shoes and with his hands crossed over his chest bowed low before the king and queen.

"What favourable wind brings the great Sheikh to us?" asked Habba modestly to Sarfi.

"Peace be with you, daughter," said Sarfi.

"With you too, great man."

The Sheikh looked at Habba and her sight dazzled him, for Habba's dress of shimmering silk and brocade was a blaze of colour. He knitted his brow and said, "O, gracious Sultana, Kashmir is in the throes of internal feuds. It is caught in the morass of communal hatred and immoral living."

"But who is responsible? As Allah lives, we shall punish him severely, learned Sheikh," said Yusuf.

"O, glorious king, you are the master of Kashmir. I am but a humble man. Yet shall I give my advice according to the

extent of my knowledge and comprehension. Respected king, it is right to compose poems and sing them but let them not be love songs but the devotional ones like those of Nund Rishi. The respected queen's songs inflame the hearts of young men and women. Her charms and her voice have cast a spell over our great king and he has neglected to look after the State. Look, great king, through the lofty window of your palace and see how Kashmir is suffering. Listening to your queen's passionate lyrics and passionate music won't do. Kindly take interest in the welfare of your people."

At first Habba Khatoon's heart beat like the heart of a frightened bird but then she felt courage returning and she said with determination: "Calm yourself, noble Sheikh and listen. When I was abandoned by my first husband I lay huddled up in a corner of my house and eating my heart out, then I saw the vision of Lal Ded opening the door. As she entered she told me: 'Why are you sorely dismayed, my dearest daughter? Such things have happened to me also. Come, God summons you out to live and love. You are supremely fitted to play a triumphant part in the world of joy. Sing of love, love true and human makes one an angel. This is a kind of devotion'. Then she consoled me with the promise of a noble lover and saying this she disappeared in the thin air. The vision of Lal Ded brought a metamorphosis in me. I sing lyrics with her command. Allah sanctions what I do."

With desperate determination Yakub Sarfi said, "Gracious queen, Fortune has bestowed rewards on you not discretely but lavishly. His Majesty is renowned for his prowess in arms and his courtesy. You know your power over his gentle heart. You give him no time and opportunity to do what he should do as a protector of his subjects. You have turned him into an epicurean."

Habba was very much grieved and remained in embarrassed thought, not knowing what to say.

"Sheikh Sahib," said Yusuf, "clanking of swords does not mean action. It is the hooligans and ragtag and bobtail who create the ugly scenes. The hired miscreants indulge in rowdyism, loot, plunder and murder. The people of Kashmir in general live in peace and harmony. It is Shahan-Shai Akbar, the Mughal Emperor who by his policy of divide and rule, wants to push the frontiers of his Indian kingdom beyond the dreams of Babar. He tries to sow the seeds of discord among the peace-loving people of Kashmir. Please reflect on my words and tell my people to keep peace and beware of the Mughal trickery."

Sarfi was not prepared to hear anything against Akbar. With feigned solicitude he said, "I will again say that though by marriage you did cramp your amatory style, all the same, the queen's place is in the royal harem and it is not right for her to sing lol-lyrics".

So far the conflict between Yusuf Shah and Yakub Sarfi had been more or less masked, now all veils were wrenched aside and with hard, hot eyes the proud man confronted the romantic Yusuf and became angry for Yusuf's self-surrender to, what Sarfi considered, a chit of a singing girl. Yakub Sarfi left in anger after bowing to both the king and the queen.

When Yakub left Habba laughed in the most melodious manner at what she considered a sad occurrence. Then both Yusuf and Habba strolled on the beautiful walks of the garden. Soon after they both ceased to reflect upon all that had happened to them at the hands of Yakub.

Similar, rather harder, were the views of Sheikh Da'ud or Baba Da'ud Khaki, who was born in 1521 A.D. He had studied under Mulla Basil Khandabhavani and 'Altama Raziyya-us-Din. Later Baba Da'ud became the disciple of Sheikh Hamza Makhdum. The Baba's poetry consisted of religious and mystical themes and Habba Khatoon's poetry could not, naturally, appeal to him. He also felt that Yusuf Shah and Habba

Khatoon were directly responsible for the disastrous sectarian frenzy.

Da'ud was a pragmatist and realised that Kashmir could not flourish under the Chak rule and it was only the Mughal government that could deliver goods to the people of Kashmir. Islam in Kashmir, in the beginning, had unified and integrated the fragmented society. He felt that the misgovernment of Yusuf had given rise to divisive and disintegrating social forces.

Baba Da'ud also lamented that the people had forgotten the lessons of Sheikh Nur-ud-Din, the patron saint of Kashmir. He alleged that Yusuf Shah had absolutely neglected his duties as a ruler and was all the time around the charming rustic belle, Habba Khatoon.

But Habba Khatoon's muse was irresistible. The intensity of emotion in her songs and the sweet voice enthralled the king who was no mean lover of music and poetry. And she attained the lofty heights of her cultural ideals with husband-king to appreciate her talents and beauty and with the fullest freedom to do as she desired. Habba's originality fructified and gave birth to literary gems.

After quite some time Sheikh Da'ud also sought audience with the king, which was readily granted. The Sheikh bowed low as he entered and Yusuf and Habba welcomed him with all courtesy. Habba had not seen him. She was impressed with his personality. Baba Da'ud was tall and well built. He had a mass of unkempt hair over his head. His eyes had a wild concentrated look which seemed to looking up and ahead. He was dressed in a long cloak. He had leather sandals and his manner reflected a life of recluse. The arrogance of his face had blended with wisdom and his eyes were deep.

Baba was the man of old orthodox school and music was to him an idler's job and not that of a king. He scoffed and said, "Auspicious king, your fame of valour will go wherever

the air blows and your heart should be bereft of the ideas of romance and love of a woman, otherwise your mind will not be prepared to accept any arguments and words of wisdom. It is a great grief to me to see that an ordinary rustic girl married to a king, for by her blood stream of our king's fathers might be polluted."

When Yusuf heard these terrible and audacious words he staggered as if he were drunken without wine. The king stood up and walked backward and forward in maddening perplexity.

"Ya Allah!" cried the king, "I have reverence for your old age and religious scholarship. But I will not endure it. You make me desperate. I do not know what I should do. Habba's mother is a princess of a noble dynasty which has ruled over Gurez and other areas of Dardistan for generations."

Habba Khatoon remained close-lipped but uttered a derisive smile. No doubt, Yusuf kept his temper in hand. But he said, "Sheikh, I am getting angry and anger is poison to good manners. Therefore, go; I forgive you for your audacity, for I am sure it is the *Shaitan* speaking in you." Then Baba Da'ud left and for some time the king was tormented.

Then Yusuf got up and went to his court and sat upon his throne with the chiefs of the kingdom standing about. He smiled his welcome to poets, scholars and mendicants. He was famed for his benevolence, excellent talents and vast learning. Muhammad Amin Mustagini, who was a Kashmiri and an eminent poet, came in and made his obeisance. Yusuf told him what transpired between Baba Da'ud and himself. He was furious on hearing it and said, "On the oath of Allah, I feel that Chak rulers have been the most cultured men. Most respected Hassan Chak, the earlier Chak ruler, was himself a poet and loved the society of poets and scholars. During his reign came from Persia a poet and calligrapher Mir Ali who wrote a long poem on Kashmir. The other poets attached to

Hussan Shah's court were Mulla Nami. Similarly your great father Ali Shah patronised Mulla Mehri, an important poet."

Next came in the court Mirza Ali Khan who was a great poet. He also heard the confrontation between the king and Baba Da'ud. Mirza said, "My Lord, I consider the gracious queen the sweet throated songstress and musician of great talent and invention who found the important *Rast Raga* and other ragas." Then collected there Baba Talib, a great poet, and a large number of intellectuals in the court. In one voice they called Habba Khatoon "the Bulbul-i-Behshat", "Andleb-i-Firdous" (the Nightingale of Paradise). They all cheered and said that it would be unfortunate if the gracious queen were to give up the writing of poetry. They all thought that the queen was a great woman, who had a great mind within a splendid form. She was sagacious, patron of the learned and cherisher of her subjects.

But the two religious leaders, Yakub Sarfi and Baba Da'ud, had raised a hurricane. They both left for Hindustan and complained to Akbar against Yusuf Shah and Habba Khatoon. They, with their loquacity, gave dishonouring reports about them. Thus Akbar became furious about Habba Khatoon and promised severe punishment to her. His eager eyes had watched the situation in Kashmir and waited for an opportunity with impatient greed. He accepted Yakub and Baba's invitation to attack Kashmir and annex it with the Mughal empire. Thus Kashmir was in peril; it was about to be attacked by the armed forces of the Mughal emperor. The thrust of ruthless imperialism was about to be felt in the paradise of Kashmir.

It is amazing that Akbar, who founded a dynasty unparalled in all history for power and wealth and splendour and sophistication, should have looked with wrathful eyes towards those who loved arts, music and poetry.

PART 6

# THE END OF THE JOURNEY

I will not sing today
My intoxicating, enchanting,
Dulcet and drowsy songs.
No more such songs for me!
Hills and mountains covered
Themselves up out of fear;
And dark clouds have hugged the hill tops;
I will not sing today,
As, with loins girt, the cunning warmonger
Lies in wait for my Kasheer.

— *Nadim*

# 26

# *Enemy at the Door*

Kashmir loomed large on the map of the Mughal military ambition. The Mughal epicurians looked with lustful eyes on the land of running streams, sparkling lakes and charming meadows. Emperor Akbar, in spite of his greatness, was the offspring of fierce ancestors, part Turk, part Mongol, men who had built pyramids of human skulls as they had trundled through Asia by their own restlessness, barbaric spirit. Though Akbar had mellowed with the passage of time but he had not lost the incendiary core and played cat-and-mouse game with the gentle and defenceless Chak rulers. Akbar had to wait for quite a long time for an opportunity to conquer Kashmir. In the meantime, he seemed to utter veiled menaces of war, as he thought Humayun had already conquered Kashmir.

The successor of Hussain Shah Chak was Ali Shah. In 1573 A.D. Akbar sent his envoys Mulla Ashqi and Qazi Sadar-ud-Din to Kashmir. They were treated with respect and Ali Shah spoke high and soft things of Akbar. The Khutaba was read in Akbar's name and coins too were struck in the Emperor's name. When Akbar's envoys returned, Yusuf sent as his envoy Muhammad Qasim with rich presents for Akbar and the daughter of his nephew for Prince Salim.

In 1580 A.D. Yusuf Shah was overthrown by his cousin Lohar Chak, he sought refuge under Akbar. Akbar, after some time, sent Raja Man Singh and Mirza Yusuf Khan to help Kashmir's Yusuf Shah regain his throne. Yusuf Shah gave a slip to the Mughals at Sialkot and came to Kashmir and was joined by the supporters at Barangalla. Lohar Chak was defeated at Sopore on 8 November, 1580 A.D. and thus Yusuf Shah regained the throne without the Mughal intervention.

This piqued Akbar and he was not a man to be trifled with. At the end of 1581 A.D. he sent from Jalalabad Mirza Tahir and Salil Aqil to Kashmir to ask Yusuf immediately to come to pay homage to the emperor. But Yusuf tried to placate the Emperor by sending his son Haider Khan with Mirza Tahir and Sahil Aqil with costly presents for the Emperor. But Akbar resented the attitude.

On August 22, 1585 A.D. Akbar left Fatehpur Sikri to settle the affairs of Kabul. When he reached Kalanaur on the first of October, he sent Hakim Ali Jilani and Baha'Din Kambu to Srinagar in order to bring Yusuf Shah with them.

Yusuf Shah had received reports from his son Yakub about the intentions of Akbar which caused him lot of anxiety. His ministers again advised him to organize his army and make himself ready to defend the country against a Mughal attack. Yusuf argued that the Mughal army was large and would overrun the valley in a matter of a few days. Morever, Akbar could order the murder of Yakub who was at that time with Akbar.

Yakub had been treated with disrespect at the Mughal court and consequently was unhappy there. He had, therefore, when the imperial camp reached Khawaspur, secretly run away and reached Srinagar. Yusuf was angry with Yakub and wanted to imprison him but was dissuaded by his ministers.

When Hakim Ali and Baha'u-Din arrived they were welcomed by Yusuf but nobody allowed him to meet Akbar. Everybody, the public and nobles and the army opposed the move. The envoys of Akbar, therefore, had to return without any success and joined the imperial camp at Hasan Abdal on December 13, 1585 A.D.

Akbar was stung to the quick when he heard the report on December 20, 1585 A.D. He decided that there was to be no shilly shallying. Yusuf had thrown an open challenge and he would punish him with a devasting blow. Therefore, from Attock he sent an army of about 5000 horses, under Mirza Shah Ruch, Raja Bhagwan Das and Sha Quli Muhram to invade Kashmir and deputed Haider Chak and Sheikh Yakub Sarfi to act as guides. The Mughal army entered Kashmir via Pakhli without meeting resistance.

Now to meet this imperial threat the people of Kashmir were divided into two groups. The one group wanted to accept the suzerainty of Akbar and thought it futile to resist the imperial intentions. They were mostly the Sunni nobles and traders. There were others led by Yakub Khan and other nobles who had vested interests. No doubt, the elder son of Yusuf Shah was faithful to the throne and Kashmir and was quite valorous, but he was violent in temper and uncontrollable. The favour he showed to his own sect excited the jealousies of the other sections and the bloody eyes of the Mughals watched it with impatient greed. Everybody acknowledged Yakub a man of action with an iron constitution and reckless courage but he was unscrupulous, almost brutal. His patriotism could not make him trustworthy. Assuredly, Habba Khatoon, beloved of the royal heart, she rose through the royal infatuation and her own intelligence and talent to become a significant force in the politics. She wanted Yusuf to fight the invaders and was sure they would win. But Habba was not an Amazon Queen who could kindle enthusiasm and spark of

hope among the Kashmiris. She was a woman of pen and poetry and letters.

Those were the days when words like nationalism and independence were never heard of. A ruler was ruler whosoever he was, local or foreigner. Chaks themselves were not actually Kashmiris. What mattered was that the ruler should be peace-loving, kind and govern for the welfare of the people. The only affinity between the ruler and the ruled was, of course, one of religion, community or sect. The majority of the Kashmiris was in favour of the Mughal rule and avoiding bloodshed.

Thus Yusuf Shal was faced with a dicision of very great importance. Two alternatives presented themselves. He could be diplomatic and yielding, maintain friendly relations by recognizing Akbar as his overlord or he could boldly and resolutely face Akbar and not yield to him. He selected, which he did not give out but kept a guarded secret in his mind, to take a middle course, a way which was invariably beset with difficulties especially in the realm of politics. The middle way was one of pretence and subterfuge beneath. He could try to show royalty to Akbar and at the same time remain independent. This course was irreconcilable. But romantics like him rarely see things in their true light.

It is wrong to presume that Yusuf Shah was a coward, for his life fully demonstrated that he was quite valrous, and turbulent Chak blood ran in his veins. It was an age when pacifism was unknown and war was a medium of self-expression for vital, restless minds. It was the best path to glory. But lately Yusuf Shah had developed a contemplative bent of mind and had begun to believe in humanism and welfare of men. He hated shedding blood and making people miserable. It is also wrong to think that Habba Khatoon was just a simpleton and an ignorant rustic who could not comprehend the simple facts of political happenings. She was highly intelligent and her influence on Yusuf Shah was quite immense and she ob-

served day to day political events with keenness. Habba Khatoon and Yusuf Shah were of one opinion as far as avoidance of bloodshed, arson and plunder were concerned. Any war entails all the evils. Besides, she thought, "Never attack the strong until you are stronger." But when compelled Habba was in favour of strong resistance and no yielding. She had her own gloomy forebodings when Yusuf came to take leave of Habba. She wept and clung to him crying that she was sure that she would never see him again. It was a sad and tearful and ominous parting. After many fond embraces Yusuf left her.

He ostensibly made efforts to fight the enemy but actually he thought it futile to resist the Mughals and had resolved to surrender himself to them.

He made arrangement for the defence of the kingdom in order to conceal his plan. The whole affair had been play-acting. When the Mughals arrived at the pass of Bulisasa, the Kashmiri army moved forward to check the advance. The Mughal forces owing to the strong resistance of the Kashmiris and also because of snow and scarcity of supplies, failed to advance. Raja Bhagwan Das, therefore, opened negotiations and sent two men with a letter to Yusuf. The letter said that they were soon getting reinforcement and it would be impossible for the Kashmiris to offer resistance. Therefore, Yusuf Shah was advised to proceed with the Raja to Akbar's presence. Yusuf talked with the envoys the whole night and finally entered into an understanding with them. Early next morning under the pretext of inspecting his army he, with a few horsemen escaped to the Mughal camp, which he joined on February 14, 1586 A.D. Actually, his behaviour at critical times was motivated by whims and it was difficult to be explained in logical terms. He was presented to the emperor by Raja Bhagwan Das on 28 March, 1586 A.D. Akbar conveniently shelved his conscience and amazingly kept Yusuf as a prisoner for two and a half years in the custody, euphemism for

imprisonment, of Todar Mal. Was it Akbar's betrayal or Yusuf's lack of practical mind? It was both.

Yusuf Shah, in the absense of Habba Khatoon, felt utterly worn out in soul and body. Everything must pass : the memory of words, kisses, embraces, but the contact of souls which had once met and hailed each other and loved each other could never be blotted out. Yusuf felt that he was dogged by some fatality which forbade the possibility of his ever meeting Habba Khatoon; against Fate there was nothing to be done. The tree of life puts forth only two sweet fruits, one is song and poetry and the other friendship. He had been deprived of both fruits so the tree of his life was bound to wither and fall. This Yusuf thought often and relapsed into sad and sulky mood.

## 27

# *Agony of Separation*

While Yusuf Shah was kept as a prisoner by the Emperor Akbar in Agra, Yakub Khan, Yusuf Shah's eldest son took the comand of the Kashmiri forces. Yakub was a man of strong nature and such men are not in the habit of resigning to fate, but challenge even the mightiest destiny. At first, Yakub appeared to Habba Khatoon a pleasant and quite a subservient man but later he looked her up and down with eyes she had never seen before. Arrogant, contemptuous and totally triumphant, openly hostile and his hatred for her was relentless. She could not live in loneliness, humiliation and survive the malice of Yakub. At the same time, Yakub was fighting a losing game against the Mughals. This is what was rumoured in the royal palace. "The Mughals, they come, they come!" These words were on everybody's lips. There was confusion and panic and running to and fro. Everyone was leaving one after the other.

Habba Khatoon felt that blossoms in her heart had withered and dead and she was plundered of her hopes. She was bewildered to distraction. The unfortunate Habba, caught in the claws of destiny, had a last look at her brilliant apartments and taking with her a bundle of spare garments and some money and jewellery, she quietly left the palace and ran down

the stairs leading to the river Jhelum. There she hailed a boat and as it came near the bank she stepped in.

"Where should I row, great lady?" enquired the boatman.

"Where all other boats are rowing," replied Habba Khatoon.

"It is a Hindu festival today and these Hindu women are going to Mahadev's temple at Panda Chok."

"Yes, I shall also go there."

The boatman looked in amazement at her but obeyed. "One is a plaything of circumstances over which no one has control," she thought and sighed. Here was the moment when not a soul could stretch the hand of help to the great queen of Kashmir. The whip of powerful Time was driving her to seek refuge somewhere. Habba Khatoon was always a fatalist.

The people of Kashmir were strange and unique in their mentality and behaviour. While they knew that the fighting was going on at a few miles from Srinagar with the Mughals, yet everyone was busy in his own routine work and some snored contentendly in their beds, unmindful of the fierce battle and consequences.

Thus reflecting Habba Khatoon sat in the boat following the other boats carrying the Hindu women. It was a long row up against the current and the rowers were chanting *Ya Peer Dastgir! Badshah, Padshah,* as they swung their paddles. Habba Khatoon's boat too paddled on when, from behind came up a magnificent boat, its rowers singing merrily. All of a sudden Habba Khatoon's boat struck against a half-sunk and abandoned barge and her boat was getting filled with water. Just as she had realised what had happened the magnificent boat gaily-lit drew alongside, and a silver voice said, "Jump in here. Don't you see the boat is sinking, Ahmadu steady!"

Ahmadu shouted to his crew, who backed the oars while the lady of the boat dragged Habba Khatoon over her

gunwale. Habba Khatoon entered the large boat in which sat the owner, who sparkled with her shining attire and glittering jewellery. Habba Khatoon had expected to see the wife of some rich Hindu merchant or a Pandit of the city going to the festival. But here was a woman dressed more glitteringly than a Hindu matron. The woman said in her sweet voice :

"Whom I have and honour of helping today?"

"I was a queen and now am a forlorn woman, Habba Khatoon and you?

"I am, venerated Sultana, Mukhta, the dancer."

Habba Khatoon was for a moment taken aback. Adverse fate had not only separated her from her husband but brought her to sit cheek by jowl with one of the most renowned dancing girls of Kashmir. She, like everyone, knew Mukhta as she had seen her dance a few times at parties, but at the moment did not recognize her. Yusuf Shah had many times praised the art and glamour of Mukhta. Her flamboyant figure had sway over many a noble. The courtesan guessing her thoughts said :

"I was not what you see me but it is my fate that made me so. I am an outcaste but I was not born one."

Habba Khatoon knew that a large number of dancers were born of a long line of matriarchal ancestors of the same trade but here seemed to be some tragic story.

"Tell me all about you, Mukhta. But where are we?"

"Worthy queen, I am going to the festival of Mahadev at Panda Chok, not to pray, for I am a Musalman born but to see the fun. I am curious to see what these Hindu women do in the temple. It will take us one full hour to reach there."

"I too will go there, but then tell me your life-story. You say you are a Musalmani?"

"Yes, and a Kashmiri too. I was born in a small village situated on the hillside of Bandipora town and I used to tend

goats and cows along with my small brother. I was myself a small girl but beautiful, intelligent and loved by my parents."

Mukhta became emotional and tears rolled down her beautiful eyes.

"What happened then?"

"One day in summer there came some Afghan slave-traders and we were alone tending sheep and goats and they carried both of us forcibly. We cried aloud but nobody was nearby and nobody came. We were brought to Kabul. I was kept in a large house where there were many more girls. I don't know what happened to my brother. I was well fed and well looked after. Then I was taken to Kabul slave-market. There an old Pathan bought me and I grew up a beautiful damsel. I became the favourite of my master and I was given the best apartment. I was taught singing and dancing; other women in the household felt jealous of me. The white-bearded old man gave me a lot of money and gifts. He had a son who was serving in the army of the Emperor of India.

Once he happened to see me in our high walled garden and we had many meetings. I wanted, somehow, to get out of the gilded cage and he agreed to take me away to India. One night he managed to take me away out of the house and in the darkness we rode towards India till we came to Agra. Here he was killed and I was left all alone with nobody to look after me and protect me. I had lot of wealth with me and I settled as a dancer and employed a Kashmiri muscle-man. I was also patronised by a noble who loved me and lavished me with gifts. I taught other women the art of dancing. You know the sort of life I lead and how I once minded goats in the valley.

There were tears in the dancing girl's eyes at the end of her brief story. Habba Khatoon felt sympathy for Mukhta, for the former knew how the Afghan and the Uzbeg slave-dealers raided the villages and kidnapped small girls. A girl from the hills of Kashmir fetched high price in the slave-markets. The

Mughal nobles were keen to get a Kashmiri girl for marriage so that the children they begot from them would be beautiful and fair.

The two ladies sat a while in silence while the rowers paddled on." Respected madam, we will see the Hindu ladies praying in the outer corridor of the temple, "said Mukhta.

So towards the temple of Mahadev, which was deserted for half the year and more, sped the boats and with them Habba Khatoon and Mukhta. The boats jammed at the temple *ghat* and the torches and oil lamps flickered as laughing and chatting women got out of their curtained boats. Away in the groves of trees the temple bells were clanging and conches brayed. The crowd of hurrying women carried Habba Khatoon and Mukhta along, the former clutching at the stones shone with the flicker of oil lamps, the air was heavy with the scent of marigold and white *champak* and the sickly aroma of the burning incense. Through the darkness and gloom that the lights heightened, loomed the great lingam of "the god of sensuous fire."

In Kashmir the Hindus followed Shaivism. Shiva is the third god of the Hindu trinity—Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. These are not three different gods but the three aspects of the same Divine Being. Kashmiri Shaivism traces its origin to Siva-Sutra, which is ascribed to Shiva himself and it is said that the god himself revealed it to Abhinavagupta ( 8th-9th century A.D.)

Shiva is variously represented and described. He is worshipped in the form of a short cylindrical pillar which is obviously the shape of phallus. He is popularly worshipped in this form and water and milk are poured over it. Shiva is considered to be the creative force of nature and it is by His injunction that the whole world multiplies and is fruitful. He is thus an agricultural god. To a barren woman, if the god is properly worshipped and propitiated by her, He can fulfill her desire of a child. 

So towards the temple of Mahadev at Panda Chok had sped the boats and with them Habba Khatoon, the queen, and Mukhta, the dancer.

Round the figure of the god, faint in the gloom, bowed the figures of kneeling women swaying in a deep intoxicating trance they chanted *Om Namo Shivai*. Habba Khatoon felt sick and asked Mukhta to lead her outside the temple. Thus they came out of the temple into a garden full of fruit trees. It was very cold and Haba Khatoon didn't know what to do next and where to go. She left the palace because the separation from her husband was unbearable for her. She knew that there were hostile elements in the palace and she would be humiliated and become the target of the evil designs of the courtiers. Yakub Khan, the eldest son of Yusuf, bore animosity towards her. She had come away along the crowd of the Hindu ladies to that temple unnoticed by any known person. Nobody would expect her there and so could not be pursued. She thought to remain in the oblivion and hiding till the conditions settled down and her husband came back. She told Mukhta accordingly.

While they were talking thus, there came the Swami of the temple. Tall, broad-shouldered, he had a broad forehead and a large sparkling eyes. He wore a long safforn-coloured robe reaching to his ankles. He exuded sympathy and goodwill. Mukhta had heard about his nobility and purity of character. She related all the matter to him. The Swami informed them that there was a deserted cottage and if properly furnished could be quite suitable for Habba. It was situated near the bank of the river and could be repaired and cleaned. Mukhta could send some boy who could serve her and get things from the market. She could visit her off and on and look to her needs and so would he. She could also inform her about the political conditions of the state. In the meanwhile, he would give her the things that were immediately needed. The proposal was acceptable to both of them, as Habba could not

expect good treatment from Yakub Khan, her stepson, who had been raised to the throne in the absence of Yusuf Shah. There in that secluded cottage, nobody was expected to harrass her. She would live peacefully till the conditions changed for good. "Bear with sorrow, for the joy is often born of sorrow," said the Swami and departed.

Thus Habba left the palace and the royal environment and though she was forlorn and forsaken yet would be out of the reach of harm. There Habba Khatoon lived quietly, reading and writing and going for walks on the river bank. Her only serious occupation was writing devotional poetry and humming them to herself. Habba Khatoon was by no means a dull woman not to have realised her situation with natural human pangs. She knew that her husband was at the imperial court of Akbar. But she could not expect nor was she informed that he was a virtual prisoner there. She hoped against hope that he would return to the valley and again meet her. At the same time, she was aware of the previous predilections and tendencies of Yusuf and had jumped at the idea that he could be enthralled by some charming lady there.

"My heart has been broken by grief. The agony, I think, cannot be remedied. For an hour or two I can banish it from my mind, but it always returns to tear my heart," she one day told Mukhta. Thus the separation from her husband caused her great pain. She was wearing away with melancholy. An ashen pallor had settled on her lovely face. She wandered about in Kashmir in its hills and dales, on the river sides or lakes, in woods and valleys, in villages and towns. She particularly visited Gulmarg which she had visited with Yusuf—perhaps with a touch of retrospective sentiment. She could not do without visiting her old haunts. Thus she lived on the memories of the past.

Her father was dead and her mother had gone back to Gurez, where her trace was not found even quite early when she had visited the place in company with Yusuf. She again

visited the place. The people of Dardistan had great respect for her, they thought her as their own daughter. The simple folk of Gurez attracted her. She spent a considerable part of her last years in Gurez. There is a magnificent hill in the bend of Kishenganga river near Gurez. She loved to sit and sing there. Habba Khatoon was restless and could not stay at one place. But then exhausted and dejected she came back to live in the cottage at Panda Chok. She lived a quiet life.

# 28

# *The War and the Cataclysm*

Mukhta, the dancer, used to come off and on to chat with Habba Khatoon and look to her needs. She would give her all the reports of the fight that still continued. When Yusuf slipped away into the Mughal camp at Buliyasa, the Kashmiri nobles declared Yakub Khan, the eldest son of Yusuf Shah, as their king. He continued to fight the Mughals and discovering that he would lose the war he perforce entered into a treaty with them. Akbar did not ratify the treaty and so he sent an army under Qasim Khan Mir Bahr on 28 June, 1586 A.D. for the conquest of Kashmir at Hastivanj. Qasim Mir defeated them and spreading terror and devastation he entered the city of Srinagar on 16th October, 1586 A.D. Srinagar wept in humiliation.

While the Mughal banner flew triumphantly over the palace of the gentle and cultured Yusuf Shah Chak, some Kashmiris like Shams Chak, Yusuf Khan and Ibrahim Khan did not give in. "Fight on," they shouted to their men. "Squeeze the necks of these Mughal rats, O citizens of Srinagar." They also looked menacingly at the aggressors, whose arrogance was intolerable. They called Yakub Khan back and declared war against the Mughals at Chanderkot. Finding themselves weak, the Kashmiris assembled on the

slopes of Koh-i-Sulaiman. On 19th November, 1586 A.D. they made an attack during the night but were again repulsed. All the same, they were unbroken in spirit and in complete self-possession. The Kashmiris occupied the hill overlooking the Dal Lake. The Mughal army came to the bottom of the hill to fight them. While they centered their attack to the front, they were simultaneously despatching some troops on the two sides to encircle the hill with the intention of attacking the Kashmiris from the rear.

Yakub Khan occupied the highest hill and could see the position of the enemy. He thought that unless the strong circle which the Mughals were trying to form was broken he and his army would be butchered in cold blood. But as he had a small number of men so he thought of a plan. The hill was surrounded by forests which were inhabited by the Kashmiri farmers and the Gujjars. He immediately sent some men with a message to them; they should help them to fight the Mughals and preserve the independence of Kashmir. The Kashmiri leaders also distributed some provisions and money among them and also promised them rewards once the Kashmiri army won. This worked. They hid themselves among the bushes, on the trees, in the ravines and spread themselves on both sides of the hill.

During the night Yakub fought an open battle in the front while the untrained peasants who were good marksmen shot arrows on the enemy from different directions. The Mughals feared that there was a large army which they could not locate and in desperation they ran down the hill while the another group of Yakub's men fought them in the front. There was a confusion in the Mughal army and they ran away. Yakub's men pursued them and killed most of them. Many fled in boats while the others ran along roads in the two directions of the main road.

Emboldened by this victory Yakub Khan and Shams Chak took shelter there and organised bands of guerrillas which the

people later called "The Guerrillas of Death". These dreaded guerrillas carried the warfare into the very heart of the Mughal camp. The calmness of the day as well as the night was broken by the cries of those killed. Among the city quarters of the Mughals tiny puffs of white smoke showed from whence the danger came. The Mughal troops were quartered all over the city and the whole city was turned into army barracks. Day by day a man after man was killed and in this cloak-and-dagger atmosphere it became increasingly dangerous to walk abroad; violence lurked round every corner. At night the Kashmiri guerrillas emboldened by success, crept in the dark streets awaiting. The appearance of a head or a body of a Mughal soldier at an opening was to add another to the bag. Morever, skirmishes took place daily.

A body of the Mughals came out every day to fight with the guerrillas but in vain. Qasim Khan tired of the battle that promised never to end got so fed up that he resigned in utter exasperation. Akbar pursuing the policy of annexation and domination at any cost saw immediately the growing menace of a unified, inspired, freedom seeking Kashmiris and took instantaneous action and sent his iron man, Mirza Yusuf Khan as Governor of Kashmir. He defeated Yakub and Shams Chak in an open fight. Yakub escaped to Kishtwar and Shams Chak tendered his submission and was sent to the Imperial Court. His life was spared and his daughter entered the Emperor's harem. Thus died away this struggle of the Kashmiris.

The Kashmiri pony was doing its best—slim, built for speed, it galloped hard, wide nostrilled and foaming. Its rider was Yakub Shah, who thought it futile to remain like a rat hidden in Kishtwar's hole. The chains of restraint, he felt were tight round his limbs, so he was returning to Srinagar to counsel with his friends and followers who had taken shelter in the houses and cellars of their friends and relatives. But he was spied by a few Mughal horsemen who had been chasing him for miles. The Mughals were fiendish with blood-lust.

The horse of Yakub leapt to clear the ditch at Panda Chok. It slipped and fell. No hope of escape was there and up raced a Mughal soldier and jumped from his horse. "Kashmiri scroundrel", he grimaced, as he looked at the unconscious Yakub. He thought him to be dead. He had received many wounds. The soldier stripped him of a few of his rich garments and jewels and money and rode away.

Yakub lay in the ditch until evening when a Kashmiri yokel caught sight of him. "Help me, oh brother, "the wounded Yakub cried groaning. The farmer lifted him on his shoulders and thought of hurrying him to the nearby cottage.

The sky was clear after the rains as the clouds were drifted away by the wind-storm. Habba Khatoon was lost in thought. The city of Srinagar drooped in silence and groaned with its wounds. Its music wailed, its laughter was hushed. The dances of Mukhta and other dancers had stopped. Many of their admirers had died. A sigh and groan escaped Habba Khatun's thin lips as she stood thus reflecting. A few minutes later there were hurried steps in the small passage of her cottage. The door which was unfastened flew open and a man staggered into the room bearing in his arms a body from which blood was streaming.

"This gallant I found on the roadside groaning under pain. I brought him here for shelter. It appears that somebody had wounded him and taken his horse and all the money that he possessed," said the man panting for breath.

"Kindly go and call the Mahatma of the nearby temple; he can treat him and cure him," said Habbba Khatoon in excitement.

It was not unusual for Habba Khatoon to nurse some wounded men who came to her cottage, which had some additional rooms. She tended any wounded person who took refuge in her cottage with the help of the Mahatma of the temple and tried to bring him back to health. In fact, she had

turned her cottage into a sort of nursing home, where a man might be treated and then rest for a few days till he gained strength enough to move. But this time she was overwhelmed with anxiety. Fear appalled her and helpless tears rushed down her eyes. She looked keenly at the man.

"Ah! it is you, my son Yakub," cried Habba Khatoon. He could not be recognised immediately by her. Short in stature though sturdy in built, he yet had a commanding look; his big head was balanced on a thick neck, his face tanned and rough, clear cut and resolute and made impressive by his thick black beard. Yakub looked what he was, a man true as steel and of indomitable courage. There was, nevertheless, a softness about the dark eyes, a look at once sincere and kind, that toned down the first impression of ferocity. A hushed silence prevailed.

Habba Khatoon made him lie on the ground and washed his wounds. Mukhta too came. As a matter of fact, she came off and on, a gentle and kind hearted woman and gave Habba her service and undying devotion. With the help of Mukhta she prepared a bed for Yakub and settled him there. Yakub did not seem to recognize Habba, he was so feeble and dazed. His condition was critical. The Mahatma came and felt his pulse. He had fever and many wounds. He said he would prepare the medicine to drink and an ointment to be applied to his wounds. He should take only milk till the fever came down. It would take him many days to recover and require careful attendance. Habba served Yakub with devotion and love.

After some days Yakub recovered a little and could not believe that it was Habba who had been serving him; she had become pale, slim and yet remained stately.

"Mother, I am doubly blessed. I escaped death and I found my dear, dear mother," said Yakub with a pleasant surprise.

"Yakub, my son, I always loved you. Well, Time is great in its powers. It brings a monarch down and raises a beggar up on a throne. But it heals the wounds of the past as it marches on relentlessly."

The Mahatma regularly brought medicines and ointment and departed muttering his blessings. So after many days Yakub recovered his health. One day the Mahatma came to examine him and felt his pulse and said smilingly that he was quite fit to move about. "What do you intend to do now?" enquired the Mahatma seriously.

"I shall organize my 'Guerrillas of Death' and drive out the Mughals."

"No, my son, you are striking your head against a granite wall. You will break you head and gain nothing in return. The people will not be with you now. Their spirit is broken and they feel that the Mughal rule is benign and they would prosper under it. So why have this useless bloodshed and unrest?" asked Habba.

"What should I do instead? Get trapped like a rat by the Mughals?" asked Yakub.

"No, my son, give yourself up to Akbar. He will forgive you and not harm you," said the Mahatma.

"Yes, *Jinab*, I shall do so."

Habba came to know through Mukhta that Akbar would arrive in Srinagar on the morning of June 5, 1589 A.D. and stay in the lofty palace of Mirza Yusuf Khan, the Governor of Kashmir. He would visit Pampore, Bijbehara, Anantnagh, Nandimarg, Achabal and then Shadipur, Sopore and Baramulla. In all he would stay in Kashmir for about two months.

"This was the best occasion for Yakub to surrender to the mercy of Emperor Akbar," thought Habba. With the help of Mukhta she was able to trace out Aiba Khan, another son of

Yusuf Shah Chak. He was called forthwith and told about the plan. Aiba was granted audience by Akbar on 2nd July, 1589. Although like a fragile reed he bent before the storm of Akbar's anger, yet he ably pleaded for his brother and submitted the petition on his behalf which was interesting.

On account of his youthful passion and friendship with vicious men, what had happened had happened. Now he was in the agony of repentance. His prayer now was that His Majesty would send his shoes so that he might place it on his head and prostate himself at the holy (Emperor's) threshold.

The Emperor accepted Yakub's apology and granted him audience on 28th July, 1589 A.D. Then cowering Yakub was ordered to go to Bihar to remain along with his father under the custody to Raja Man Singh.

Mukhta, who regularly called on Habba Khatoon, was influenced and inspired by her thoughts. She realised that the true love of one man was far better than the false love of many.

"I get applause of hundreds of people. No doubt, my benignant smiles fall like flowers on my admirers. But, I cannot call one person as my Love, a husband, with whom I could blend my love. I must sing and dance to please multitude. I bloom for all to see; only my senses reel with excitement without any feeling," she spoke to herself. She resolved that she must love and marry some one person and enjoy or suffer love of that person. There was a complete metamorphosis in the person of Mukhta.

There was one noble young man, Nasir, who was a trader by profession. He was sincerely in love with Mukhta and entreated her to marry him but all the time she evaded him. But now she was too eager to join in a wedlock with him and lead a peaceful and respectful life. She told Habba about her decision who was delighted to hear it. At the same time, Habba Khatoon became acutely conscious of her unhappy career. She discovered how stricken to the heart she was by

her incapacity for love's function. The bitter awareness of her infertility gnawed at her heart now as never before. God had debarred her from motherhood; this thought was like a dagger thrust in her soul. She would have given all this world for the natural happiness of being wholly woman and mother.

Habba Khatoon's mind had on her side felt agitated, for her eyes had pierced through the coloured veil of life and seen that all worldly pleasures were futile. She, earlier, no doubt, had a determined character. She was insistent that others including Yusuf must do as she ordained and she always had a practical sense. As years passed, however, she had developed a religious fervour.

Habba Khatoon greeted the dawn that awoke her with a smile. She found the room with rainbow colours that entered through the open window till she felt drowsy and stretched her limbs, her lips smiling, her body refreshed with the night's deep slumber and her soul at rest. When she was fully awake she sat up and contemplated the rainbow colours. It was like a divine vision. She cupped her own dainty eyes and automatically thought of Nund Rishi. She heard a voice which reverberated in the room, "Habba, I have come to you in the light of rainbow to say that now is the time for you to transport your mundane love to divine love. People have become cruel and vicious and lost all moral and religious sense. They have forgotton my lessons. They are doomed. God has bestowed you with a melodious voice. Go and sing my verses. Now pass your years in piety and devotion to Allah. Allah-O-Akbar."

Habba opened the eyes and there were no colours and there was no voice. But she felt her soul drenched with blissful content. She felt the ecstasy of the sweet words that had soothed her body and soul. She again smiled complacently and joyously.

Then the Mahatma of the temple came to find out if Yakub Shah had returned. She told him of the strange vision and the

voice. The Mahatma remarked, "According to our philosophy you and Yusuf Shah Sahib have been trying from one existence to another to seek each other and to love each other, so intense had been your love. Man is born again and again till he joins the godhead. You have been Alla Hazrat's soul-mate and he yours. Now you have experienced the ecstasy and the agony of the wordly love, which is transient. You must now love God. He is one permanent Reality. Rise daughter, May God strengthen your belief in Him according to the dictates of your religion."

After a couple of days Yakub came and invited her to accompany him to Bihar and meet Yusuf but she declined saying.

"Firstly, Yusuf, my master has been refused to call me there. I am by the orders of Emperor Akbar not to go to meet him. Secondly, I was born here, I shall live here and die and be buried in my own soil. Go, my son and serve your father. My wordly love has become transmuted into the love of Nature and Allah. I have drained the cup of pleasure to its last drop but now I have the thirst of the eternal fire in me. I now hunger for the love of Allah. Go, grief is a cleansing force; I have a different life now. I may come to Yusuf when the time is ripe. I have seen the light that showed me the way to the sublime happiness. Allah alone is great!"

Disappointed Yakub left his mother after embracing her. The eyes of both the mother and the son were full of tear. She was worn and torn as a tree in a storm on the crossroads. She sank to her knees and wept; weeping seemed to soothe her pent-up emotions as she felt reassured that Allah was with her. Then Habba Khatoon sat for the whole day trying to recall the *shruks* of Nund Rishi and sayings of Lal Ded, never knowing if she could recollect them. But amazingly all the verses came to her mind. Next day when Aziza, her neighbour, came she told her that she was leaving and going from place to place

and she entrusted the cottage and other things it contained to her. Fear and hope could no longer assail her mind.

Love lyrics ceased to flow from her lips. Instead she sang the devotional verses. She went uttering Allah's name from one beauty spot to another, communicating with Nature. Her life was now humble and austere and she was an emblem of gentle humility. Now the whole valley of Kashmir was reverberating with the verses of the mystics and devotional songs in praise of Allah and His Prophet.

# 29

# *There was no Moon*

Yusuf Shah Chak remained in captivity in Agra from March 28, 1586 A.D. to October 1587. After his release he was granted a small *jagir* at Biswak, a small village near Patna, Bihar, where he now lived. In the cramped claustrophobic environment of Agra, dominated and unsettled by the unpredictable personality of Emperor Akbar, depression brooded on the surface of Yusuf's mind. In spite of the fact that he regaled Akbar by his musical performances and even corrected Tansen when he was playing some *raga* and got admiration from him, Akbar's heart never softened towards him and his wife, Habba Khatoon. Whenever he prayed that he might be allowed to go to Kashmir, a furious opposition sprang up from Akbar against his request. He forbade the reunion between him and his beloved Habba.

Separation adds to the power of those we love. The heart retains only what is dear to us in them. The echo of each word coming through space from the distant beloved rings out in the silence, faithfully answering. So was the case with Yusuf, who seemed to hear the old songs of Habba. All the same, he found life in Bihar hard.

"Ah"! he complained, "It is very tiresome. Life here is hard. Everything is so dear. We have enormous expenses".

Actually, it was very difficult for him to live on a small pension that he received from Akbar.

In Kashmir Habba Khatoon's regrets and sorrows grew less acute with time. There was left only a sort of mute suffering. Over the years Habba Khatoon developed from an ordinary woman with a pretty face and pretty voice into a woman of wisdom and strength of character under the stress of the historical, political and military events in which she was inevitably associated. She abandoned her earlier romantic dreams in which she was the splendid beloved of Yusuf and her character acquired depth and seriousness.

Yusuf had many devout followers and friends in Kashmir and as they came to know his whereabouts they were ready to migrate there and live near their benefactor. Mukhta came and informed her that Yusuf's life was ebbing. A caravan of people, men and women and children were ready to join Yusuf Shah at Biswak and she could also go along with them.

"No, my appeal to join my husband at Basra has been turned down by Akbar. He has not allowed me to see him. Where Yusuf is concerned I would stand fast to the very end. I could vouchsafe a little joy, a little happiness to the poor heart of Yusuf. I would be able to ease and strengthen him in his suffering," she said. "But I am helpless and disillusioned with the material world and I would now devote my time to prayers and reading the Holy Quran."

Yusuf dreamed of Habba. He remembered that one day Habba told him "I am only happy in your happiness. Unhappy that I am I must get your support in my affliction."

At these words Yusuf had seized her in his arms, holding her pressed closed to his bosom and cried in a piercing tone, "Habba, now I can die peacefully".

Now those days had evaporated. Nevertheless, Yusuf was always a God-fearing and a religious man and a devotee of Nund Rishi. He was the disciple of Fakir Alam Baba. Yusuf

was a philosopher and the question of the aim of life always haunted him. But now he had found the answer to it. He had found faith in a living and universal God. And suddenly when he was a prisoner in Agra, he had come to know the feelings that God was among the poor simple men who worked day and night. He had learnt to see the great God in everything and he now felt well and happy. He had realized that without God's will not one hair of man's head falls. He was happy in the company of the humble folk of Basra. There were many sympathetic friends. They met in the evenings and sang the songs of Habba Khatoon with the accompaniment of *tumbakhnari*. Yusuf loved Kashmir and its people till end. He had a fascinating smile and polite ways and was generous to fault. One could not hold conversation with him without being deeply impressed.

But one night he could not sleep. He was ruminating over the past in his mind. No person in the wide world could be so steeped in sorrow as he was that night.

He called one of his servants, named Qadira. "Qadira, will you sing for me?" His looks were divine as he asked him. Qadira sang the song of Habba Khatoon which Yusuf had last heard from her:

"I have to suffer the scorching flames in my heart
Let no one lose her years of youth!

My parents fed me on candy and musk
And washed me in the showers of milk;
Now I wander helplessly;
Let no one lose her years of youth!

My parents gave all love to me
And bevy of maids stood to serve me.
Never I imagined the magnificent mansion
Of love and joy would fall to ruins.

When my parents gave me away in marriage

My friends sang of my fortunate future.
Their songs of love and luck never came true.
Let no one lose her years of youth!

They called me the lucky bride
"Your in-laws are eagerly awaiting you, "they sang.
The bright painted palanquin was decorated with silver.
Let no one lose her years of youth!

Now I am here while you are far away there;
Both loved so dearly each other;
Who could imagine that my world of love
Would thus crumble to dust.

If God is hostile and destiny favours not,
How can a man live on a handful of grain?
Habba Khatoon has drunk deep of love.
Let no one lose her years of Youth!"

He felt comforted and his mind was as sprightly as a robin in spring. He lived on but his was a hand-to-mouth existence. It was September 11, 1592 A.D and on this day Yusuf lay in his bed. He felt cold and shivering and his body trembled like a plant in great wind. Possibly he had an intense fit of malaria. He asked Qadira for water. Qadira heated some water which he took in sips. All his body perspired and he felt pain in the pit of his stomach and tossed on his bed. They thought it to be seasonal fever and would subside soon. Actually he had been keeping ill for the last six days.

He told Qadira, "Habba with her loving and graceful manners and soft attractive voice could charm and soothe me whenever I fell ill. She had an imaginative turn of mind and a knack of making the dullest of subjects interesting. Her wit and wisdom and good humour never seemed to fail her. I never felt boredom in her company. When I was ill she watched over my delicate health with undiminished care, always striving to avert the melancholy moods. Mine is now a miserable existence." He then gazed at Qadira. Yusuf had

already an instinctive premonition of his own death. Nothing gave greater intensity to love than the imminence of death and nothing gave poignancy to death than its irremadiable severing of the bonds of love. At last Yusuf again sighed and asked for water. Qadira put a spoonful of water in his mouth and then Yusuf gave up the ghost. There was a universal outburst of grief and indignation in Kashmir which was expressed in hushed tones when the news of Yusuf's death reached Kashmir and spread like wildfire. The people of Kashmir of different sects and religions felt for one another and automatically and unconsciously a common bond of unity and feeling was established.

For Habba Khatoon the sun had set. She continued to live in her cottage at Panda Chok and was, year by year, worn out by dejection and poverty. Dread malady had seized her and she was weary of life. But she never spoke of her suffering to anyone. She was all the time murmuring the name of Allah and His prophet (peace be upon Him!). There was in her last years only gratitude for the gifts of life bestowed on her by God and it welled from the heart of Habba now even in her agony.

Habba Khatoon burnt all her papers, including those containing her poems and verses, shut herself in her own cottage and had no communication with the outside world. Renunciation had brought with it a mysterious initiation, a fine insight to Habba Khatoon. She could see the approaching end and she was glad. On her last day of her life in the year 1605 A.D. she got up and bathed and read Holy Quran for quite a long time and then performed *Nimaz*. Her face suddenly took on bloom. She got strength and the candle of her life shone brilliantly. In the evening it was stifling and a hot mist hung over the village. Habba came to her home from a stroll in the nearby field. She was suffering from heat and could neither speak nor breathe freely. She made an effort to sip some water. There were some children and a few women in her room.

They all kept silent, looking at her. The clouds had now covered the face of the moon; there was no breeze. She suddenly waved her hands in the air, clutched at the edge of her bed, moaned and collapsed. The children and the women were beside themselves with grief and screamed and cried to her, "Mother! mother!" But she made no sound. They were all at the wits' end. Then an old servant and her devout follower entered the room on hearing the cries. He looked at the dead woman and cried:

"Ah, all is darkness; the moon will shine no more!" He was sore at heart and wept bitterly. Earlier she had called the Maulvi of the village-mosque and told him that she should be buried near her cottage at Panda Chok. No stone or tomb with any inscription be raised on her grave, only a few plants of flowers might be planted on it. All her personal belongings should be distributed among the poor and the Mughal Governor should not be informed of her death.

The whole of Kashmir wept when they heard of Habba Khatoon's death; no smoke came out of the houses on that tragic day. All bewailed the death of the talented daughter of their race. Habba Khatoon had risen as a luminous moon in the firmament of Kashmir's history.

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# *Glossary*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Allah-O-Akbar | : | God is great |
| Azan | : | Call for summoning the Muslims to prayers |
| Bab | : | Father |
| Bachha Nagma | : | Dance of male dancers, usually young boys. |
| Badsha Salaamat | : | Long live the king. |
| Banda Pathar | : | Kashmiri theatrical performance, usually comical. |
| Brahaspati | : | Jupiter |
| Chanderma | : | Moon |
| Chang | : | local wine in Gurez |
| Choga | : | Cloak |
| Crar-i-Sheriff | : | A village in Kashmir where exists the mausoleum of Sheikh Noor-u-Din Wali, popularly called Nund Rishi, the patron saint of Kashmir. |
| Darvesh | : | A Muslim saint |
| Doonga | : | A large boat |

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| Fakir | : | Ascetic |
| Ghat | : | Flight of steps leading to a landing-place on a river |
| Gulmeuth | : | An amount of money paid to the bride by her relatives and friends. |
| Gushtaba | : | Meat ball cooked in curd. |
| Hafiz Nagma | : | Dance of a female dancer. |
| Hak | : | A vegetable with large leaves. |
| Hakim | : | Physician. |
| Harem | : | Women's apartment of the Muslims. |
| Hookah | : | Hubble bubble. |
| Houri | : | A heavenly beauty. |
| Id' | : | Muslim festival observed twice in a year as *Id-ul-Zuha* or the festival of sacrifices and as Id-ul-Fitar, festival of breaking the fast (Ramzan). |
| Jinab | : | Sir. |
| Jagir | : | A landed estate. |
| Kaka | : | Uncle or grand-father. |
| Karma | : | Action performed either in the present or the past existences of man according to the Hindu philosophy. |
| Khilat | : | Robe of Honour. |
| Khawja | : | Respected elderly person among the Muslims. |
| Krewas | : | Alluvial plateau. |
| Kulcha | : | Saltish pancake. |

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| Loochis | : | Fried leavened bread. |
| Mazzar | : | graveyard. |
| Madir-i-Mehraban | : | Kind mother. |
| Mahadeo | : | Lord Shiva. |
| Moazzin | : | Caller for prayers. |
| Mohatarim | : | Mister. |
| Mohatirama | : | Lady |
| Nakara | : | Drum beating. |
| Nimaz | : | Prayer of Muslims. |
| Nikah Nama | : | Marriage contract among Muslims. |
| Padshah | : | King. |
| Pakora | : | Vegetables mixed with flour fried in oil. |
| Pardah | : | Veil. |
| Pashmina | : | Soft wool of a goat found in Ladakh and Tibet. |
| Patwari | : | Village revenue official. |
| Pujari | : | A Hindu religious man in charge of a temple. |
| Rista | : | A Kashmiri meat preparation. |
| Rogen Josh | : | A meat preparation. |
| Samovar | : | Kettle for boiling tea. |
| Sarangi | : | A stringed musical instrument. |
| Sartaj | : | Master, usually said by a wife to her husband or lover. |
| Shali | : | Paddy, unhusked rice. |
| Shamiana | : | A large canopy. |

Shahinshah-i-Buland Akhtar : King of great luck.

Sharda : Original Kashmiri script.

Shahzada : Prince.

Shilvar : Trousers.

Shukar : Venus.

Tashwana : Locality where prostitutes and courtesans lived.

Tosh shawl : Fine shawl made from the fine wool of a goat found in the upper regions of Ladakh and Tibet.

Tumbaknari : A Kashmiri dolki (small drum).

Ulamas : Muslim theologians or scholars.

Vakya : Devotional sayings in Kashmiri verse, spoken by Lalleshwari, known as Lal Ded, the mystic saint of Kashmir.

Vazir : Minister.

Zard pillav : A dish of yellow rice containing meat or peas.



## *Prof. S. N. Wakhlu*

Prof. Somnath Wakhlu was born at Srinagar in Kashmir. He grew up with a love for books. As luck would have it, the direction of his career was decided on his obtaining an appointment as Librarian of the Prince of Wales College (now called Govt. G.M. College), Jammu. Then, after a few years, he switched to teaching when he was selected as Lecturer in English by the State Public Service Commission. Later he was promoted as Professor of English. He taught in the Government A.S. College, Srinagar, and Government M.A.M. College, Jammu. At present he heads the Amar Mahal Museum and Library, Jammu.

Prof. Wakhlu is an orator and acknowledged as an eminent writer. He has contributed a number of articles, short stories and poems in English to newspapers and periodicals. He has been regularly broadcasting 'talks from the Radio Kashmir, Jammu and Srinagar stations for the last twenty-five years. He has also written a few scripts for the Doordarshan. He has contributed six articles on Kashmiri poets to the Encyclopae-

dia of Indian Literature, published by the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi.

He is a member of "The Fame", a society of free-lance journalists and Adviser to "The Individuals", an association of artists. Photography is his hobby.

Prof. Wakhlu has been living continuously in Jammu for more than thirty years, with a break of five years, with his wife, Shrimati Prabha Devi and his son, Dr. Vijay Wakhlu. He has one daughter, Rita.